

Ends, Justified

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Ends, Justified

by [paradoxalriven](#)

Summary

Nightmare is a vigilante and a thorn in the Syndicate's side, almost as bad as the former #1 hero—now missing, with a bounty on his head. It seems like every time they get close to figuring out another lead on the corruption deep in the Hero Federation's core, Nightmare is there first, mucking up their investigations and sticking his nose where it doesn't belong.

Technoblade doesn't volunteer to deal with the problem so much as stumble into the job, but whatever, it's just one annoying guy in a stupid mask. How hard can it be?

Notes

"Do we really need another superhero AU" Yes. Absolutely. And I hope we get literally a dozen more on top of this one. I cannot get enough superhero AUs and I have no regrets.

things fall apart

He hits the roof wrong, gravel slipping out from under his soles as he slams down on one knee and tears his jeans right open. Blood beads up, leaves barely visible smears behind as he scrambles to his feet, and then he's off again before anyone can spot him on his hands and knees. If the heroes on his tail see him looking weak, it's over.

The memory of blood on Ranboo's hands, spilling out of his chest, down his lips as he whispers, "Dream?"

It's already over.

He didn't wake up that morning expecting to run for his life. Kind of the opposite, actually; Dream's been sitting pretty at spot number one for almost six years now. It hasn't always been easy, and there are days where he wonders if it's worth it, but today isn't one of those days. Today, he wakes up shortly before dawn and breathes in the misty spring air, watching fog banks roll through the outer districts near the lake on Esemipi's east side.

It's a good morning, and he leans against his cracked window to watch golden ribbons chase through the fog as the sun rises. This high up, it's a hell of a view.

Dream eventually swings himself out of bed, late for training by his own impossible standards, though the sun's barely up. Since he's already late, it's fine if he takes a little bit longer to cook breakfast too, standing over the stove with his tail swaying behind him. With no sign of Sapnap or George yet, he's not the only one getting a slow start. He considers that, then adds more bacon to the pan.

The door to his apartments in the Tower slams open, but Sapnap is self-aware enough to wait for it to swing closed again before he shouts, "Dream! Wake the *fuck* up, we got big shit to do today!"

"No, we literally do not," Dream calls from the kitchen, not looking up from his pan. There's the slap of sneakers on his floors, then Sapnap comes skidding to a halt just beside him, George following at a much more sedate pace a few seconds later. "You want pancakes or waffles?"

"Pancakes, obviously," George says, before Sapnap can give an opinion.

"Obviously," Dream parrots back, trying to mimic George's accent. It earns him a slap across the back of his head as Sapnap raises his voice to complain, and he laughs as he turns on the burners beneath the griddle.

They're a matching set, the three of them. George is human but Sapnap's got small black horns buried under his bangs, too sharp teeth and over-warm skin, the only hints of his heritage as a demon hybrid there are. He's one of the true hybrids too, his father fully demon-

blooded and old as *dirt*, but it's not like it ever has a chance to go to his head. Not with Dream and George around to bully him, just like he'll bully them in turn.

Dream's own horns are white, not quite as stubby as Sapnap's, and he's got the tail and pointed ears of an ender hybrid, just pale. Unnaturally pale, even, paper white and glowing like snow in sunlight, but it's just become part of his brand. Like the vibrant green eyes and the delicate domino mask that does nothing to hide who he really is—when Schlatt had pulled him to the side all those years ago and proposed a future where heroes went maskless, he'd... hesitated. But he had to believe that the cause was righteous, and he had to believe that Schlatt had a plan, so when he'd debuted, it had been with his power nullifier disabled and his hybrid features on full display.

He'd never expected Sapnap and George to follow him, but they had. His team, all three of them, with their matching white body armor and bright color accents, unstoppable and every single one of them in the top ten hero rankings.

Now he's here, Sapnap and George setting their masks to the side and using civilian names even in the Tower, his own mask absent for the moment. They'll be professional as soon as they head back out, because allowing his physical form to be put on display has only made Dream more paranoid with everything else about himself, but in the apartment it's safe enough.

"Did you hear they're officially confirming Icarus as part of Team Sigma today?" Sapnap asks, legs kicked up over one of Dream's chairs as he leans back in the one he's currently occupying. "It's only been like, two months, but I guess he meshes with them pretty well, so..."

"Weird. It took a year for them to put you on our team," George says, but he doesn't sound bothered by it. There's not a whole hell of a lot that George *is* bothered by, and the baby heroes don't even make the list.

"He was regularly teamed with them during tryouts." Dream isn't bothered either, but he's probably worked closer with Team Sigma than either of them—Icarus is technically Sapnap's protege, just like Daedalus was meant to be the Warden's, but in practice all of them came under Dream's care. He's the one down in the training rooms the most often, the one trusted, along with the Captain and President Schlatt, to make confirmations of new heroes, and the one who saw potential in Icarus where a lot of people saw only chaos.

What he doesn't say is that they need him, desperately, on a team. The Hero Federation is spread too thin as it is, with Team Sigma the only ones making it through the tryouts with high enough scores to recruit. Schlatt had pushed for them to take on a few more, some of the ones who fell just short, but with the Captain and Dream both refusing, he didn't have the votes.

("We aren't training cannon fodder, Schlatt," the Captain says, her downy-white hair puffed out with anger. Dream's own hair is a little more ruffled than it should be, but he bites his tongue and keeps his temper in check.

“Oh, come *on*.” Schlatt is drunk, again, and angry, again. He hates to lose almost as much as he hates being seen as anything less than perfectly in control.

“Our decision is final.” The Captain shoves one folder across the desk, Icarus’s folder, Tommy’s folder, and none of the others. “He’s the only one who passed, and he’s the only one we know for a fact will survive being a hero. You get him and no one else.”

“We’re selecting for quality,” Dream adds, hands shoved in the pocket of his black hoodie, useless domino mask resting on his nose. “You don’t need ten heroes if you have one good one. We can rework the patrol schedules again if we need to.”

“Fuckin’—whatever.” With a sneer, Schlatt signs the front of the folder and then storms out of the meeting room. Across the table, Dream meets the Captain’s hidden eyes and sighs.)

“Yeah but come on. I had to fly solo for a year!” There’s the sound of a smack, skin on skin, and Sapnap hisses softly in pain. “Well, not entirely solo I guess, I was with you guys, but no one knew it.”

“Maybe we should have never let you join us,” George says with a smile that’s desperately trying to be a sneer, unable to even pretend like he’s truly angry. “You’re so stupid, and Dream’s already stupid enough for both of us.”

He huffs and flips the pancakes, moving the bacon onto a plate and cracking a few eggs into the grease. “Can I just—can I just point out that I am *literally* carrying this team? I’m the number one hero. What are you again, George?”

“Yeah, George, what rank are you again?”

George huffs. “Those rankings are rigged and you know it. All I see is bacon, Dream, where are our pancakes?”

“You’re spoiled. You’re both spoiled. What would you do without me?” He plates a couple pancakes and drops them on the table, following it with the bacon a second later. Despite the pretend outrage in his voice, he’s smiling. “You don’t get eggs because you’re whiny and needy and I hate you. I *hate* you.”

“Not as much as I hate you,” George says with a grin as Sapnap stands to find the syrup.

After breakfast, he pulls on his under armor and ditches his civvie clothes, mask settled on his nose last before they all head out. Like George and Sapnap, he’s not fully armored—it’s good practice to walk around in uniform once they’re in the Tower proper, but it’s not a rule, and technically they’re not on patrol today. He’s *supposed* to be doing paperwork, but it’s easy to follow his friends down to the training rooms instead, where Team Sigma is going through their paces.

Or, more accurately, Icarus is running circles around Daedalus and trying not to get blown up for his efforts.

“How long have they been at this?” he asks Lethe, who wrings his hands at the edge of the invisible wall of power nullifiers that separate the main sparring ring from the rest of the training room. It’s a stopgap measure, to keep stray power usage from crossing over, but Daedalus is controlled and precise with his explosions so it’s not necessary in this case.

“Um.” Lethe’s long-fingered hands wring harder, tail flicking a few times. He, like the rest of Team Sigma, like most of the new heroes, runs around with his hybrid features out while in costume. But unlike Dream, he does use his disguise when he’s not on the job, and there’s only three people who know that disguise’s face: the two boys under Lethe’s command, his best friends in the world, and his mentor, Dream.

Maybe he could have been offended by that, having Lethe put under his guiding hand just because they’re both ender hybrids, but he isn’t. For one, Ranboo is something *else*, something that takes the black skin of his ender heritage and bleaches it, that takes the teleportation they both share and magnifies it. For another, Dream would have picked him anyways, hybrid or not. He’s smart, he’s *calculating*, and his scores are some of the best that Dream has ever seen in the hero track.

Five years he’s known Ranboo, one with him as his official hero designation, four as one of the dozens of young hopefuls that show up to train in the hopes of being accepted once they turn sixteen. They’ve been good years.

“Maybe an hour?” Lethe’s voice ticks up uncertainly, ears flicking, tail whipping once before stilling again. Dream’s own tail sways lazily, ears up, eyes forward, no hint of stress in his own posture.

“Huh. Icarus’s stamina is better than it was a few months ago.” Sapnap’s alternating between cheering and groaning as Icarus backflips over an explosion, bounds away in a parody of Dream’s own fluid movements, then slides under another explosion to try and jab at Daedalus’s unprotected stomach. “You’re not on patrol until next week, right?”

“Mhm, yeah. The Captain wanted us to work out the uh, work out the kinks in our fighting coordination, on account of...” Lethe untangles his fingers long enough to gesture at the sparring ring, where Daedalus has launched Icarus clear across the ring, nearly across the room.

At the last second, vibrant gold wings snap out, opening up and slowing Icarus’s fall to something more manageable. A small, approving hum vibrates through Dream’s throat, and he smiles. “You’ll make it work. The three of you were inseparable during the tryouts, this isn’t any different—once he figures out that a year in the field means *yes* you *do* have more experience.”

“Is that ever going to happen?” There’s a hint of exasperation in Lethe’s voice, which, yeah. This is Tommy they’re talking about. It’s a fair question.

“Believe me,” Dream says, gaze locked on a laughing, whooping Sapnap, “Vulcan was the *exact* same way. A mission or two in, he’ll realize that you know some stuff he still needs to learn, and he’ll settle in a bit. Daedalus is usually support, not frontline, so Icarus is going to have to listen to you more in the field.”

“I really hope so. I really, really hope so.” Lethe sighs, but his tail is swaying only a fraction faster than Dream’s now, and he isn’t twisting his fingers together quite so viciously anymore.

It only takes a few more minutes before Icarus manages to land a hit on Daedalus that knocks the other boy to the ground. He stands there and celebrates, wings flared and arms thrown to the sky, while Daedalus groans and rolls to his feet, shaking himself off before trudging to the edge of the ring. That’s their cue to step in, and Dream meets Sapnap’s eyes through his mask as he grins, as they both move towards the center and settle into sparring poses.

“Ready to meet your maker, Vulcan?” Dream asks, letting the world fall away as he eases into that mental space where he’s ready to fight.

“Stop trying to fuck my dad, Hermes,” Sapnap snaps back with a grin, flames curling through his teeth on the exhale.

And then the alarm on his watch goes off, and it all goes to shit.

He can teleport across rooftops. Vulcan and Somnus can’t. As a compromise, between Dream’s swiftness and the necessity of the team to remain together, they freerun instead, boots slamming across fire escapes, hands grasping at flagpoles as they use momentum to swing over large gaps.

They make a hell of a sight, flashes of blue and orange as his teammates jump and their capes flutter, his own distinctive lime green bright under the burning sun. He knows that there’s at least one news helicopter pacing them, probably more; trying to take their own helicopter would have just set them up to crash. Fucking vultures.

“We’re two blocks out now,” Somnus says, glancing down at his Tower-issued watch just long enough to check the GPS. “Erebus should fall back as soon as we arrive on scene.”

“Vulcan, try and block them from escaping, put some holes in Zephyrus’s wings if you have to. Somnus, you’re managing Orpheus. Leave direct combat to me.” His voice is hard, clipped, different now that they’re out in the field. Part of that is because of the watch, which alters the sound of his voice the same way it alters the sound of every hero’s voice.

Part of that is him. The Syndicate never moves during the daylight, and Dream doesn’t like that they’re doing it now.

There’s the clash of metal on metal as they draw closer to the bank supposedly being robbed; Dream has his doubts about the true motives behind the attack here, but he doesn’t have time to worry about that right now. Erebus is outmatched, three to one, and even if Orpheus isn’t in the fight—a glance down at the street shows him bent over hostages, crooning commands in their ears—it’s still an unfair matchup.

“Change of plans,” Dream calls over comms, knowing that Erebus will be able to hear them now that they’re close, “Somnus, your focus is hostage rescue. Erebus, join him.”

“Hermes and I can take Blood God and the Angel of Death,” Vulcan says a second later, fire at his heels as he launches himself over the broad chasm of the street and lands on the roof. Dream teleports beside him, already drawing a sword, and knows that Somnus is on his way down to street level as they speak.

Erebus doesn’t say anything, just nods and breaks off, their blackened glasses hiding the glow of their eyes. Before the Syndicate can follow, Dream is there, his own sword lifted to ward off the blow, the sound of Vulcan’s revolver cracking a second later.

As a rule, heroes don’t get guns. Guns are something villains might use, guns are something *police* might use, but they have powers and they have civilians to consider. A stray bullet in the heat of battle can have devastating consequences, but something has to go *drastically* wrong for a naked blade to do the same. Vulcan is the exception; his powers, like Daedalus’s, are devastating when they aren’t tempered, and he’s a brilliant shot. More importantly, Team Epsilon, Dream’s team, *the* Dream Team, is on call for any and all Syndicate attacks, which means they need ranged weapons.

There’s a gust of air as the Angel of Death leaps into the sky, Vulcan’s pistol cracking again. Dream can’t focus on that because he’s too busy focused on Protesilaus. On the Blood God.

In the history of the Federation, there have only been two heroes able to go toe to toe with the Blood God and walk back out alive. One is Erebus, a wither hybrid that was lucky enough to come into the world without the touch of death lingering on their palms.

The other is Dream.

“I was having a good day before this,” he complains, flicking his wrist to deflect the slash that scrapes down the edge of his blade. “You just had to go and be off schedule.”

“Yeah,” Protesilaus growls, the unseeing pits of his skull mask boring into Dream’s eyes, “can’t imagine why we’d do *that*.”

Dream bites back the banter that wants to slip free, leaving comms clear as Erebus and Somnus work to take out Orpheus and get the hostages to safety. He needs his focus on the fight anyways; Protesilaus is a monster, too fast for how large he is and striking with blows that vibrate up Dream’s arm and into his teeth. His blood-red cape whips around them both, the furred collar high around his neck but not high enough to hide the way skin peels back and reveals black bones and purple soulfire underneath.

Erebus is a wither hybrid, with white eyes and blackened fingers. Protesilaus is a wither hybrid, with a blaze of magenta soulfire spilling out from under the blackened skull fastened to his head, a form that is more skeleton than human, held together only by the soulfire that turns into destruction whenever he touches something. They share a kingly aesthetic sense, and Dream’s always wondered if that was intentional—before he’d proven himself, Protesilaus had seemed dedicated to making the founding hero’s life a misery.

Now he’s got Dream to do that with. Dream who teleports a few feet behind him before driving his blade forward in a strike, Dream who dips and weaves and dodges but knows

he'll survive the brush of skin against his own. 'Skin', when Protesilaus has very little of that left.

The rooftop cracks and crumbles under their feet as they clash, the withering effect aging the stone and concrete until it's dangerous terrain. Zephyrus hasn't come in to strike yet, which means Vulcan's doing his job, the haze of heat and gunsmoke filling the air as he fires again and again and again. His mind is whirling, circling the implications of what Protesilaus had said, half an ear listening to the chatter as hostages are rescued and it's too *easy*.

It's too easy.

Erebus shouldn't have lasted as long as he had.

They want him on the roof for some reason.

It's too easy.

"Vulcan, get down on the street and help them evacuate, *now*," Dream snaps, seeing the way Protesilaus's mouth stretches into a sharp-toothed grin under his mask.

"But—"

"Now, Vulcan."

Searing heat to his left as Vulcan sends a wall of fire past him, high into the sky to force Zephyrus to veer off course, and then the clatter of feet on a fire escape. He's heading down, leaving them to Dream, who teleports to the other side of the roof and tries to catch his breath, but he doesn't get more than a second before Zephyrus is diving down on him with knives drawn, Protesilaus thrusting his sword forward and angled at his neck.

Both of them are grinning at him from under black feathers and black bones, and he's figured out the trap too late, too late. The soft hiss of explosives igniting is the only warning he gets before the cracked roof stops sagging in and blows *out* instead. His footing slips, Protesilaus's sword slicing clean down his arm as one of Zephyrus's knives catches just under his mask and opens his cheek up. Then he's twenty feet away, on a different building, and ten more, fifteen feet the third jump, bouncing rooftop to rooftop as they give chase.

Moving away from the explosion that's overtaken the bank building in flames, away from the hostages that he can only hope are far enough to be safe, away from his team. Shit. He's playing right into their hands.

"What's the matter, Hermes?" Protesilaus's voice carries over the sound of helicopter blades, the press circling the rising smoke like carrion birds. "You can't do what Erebus can?"

"Waiting for you to catch up," Dream says, changing direction all at once to go on the attack. His voice sounds off, wrong, and a glance at his bloodied arm shows why: his Federation watch was built to take a lot of damage, but even it can't hold up to a netherite blade with withering effects in play.

He shuts up.

No way to contact his team, no way to keep an ear out for news chatter and police radio, and no GPS to track him. Also, he can't tell the time now. So that sucks. His sudden change in strategy works though, catching Protesilaus off guard enough that Dream lands a blow, slicing off some of the flaming fingers on his left hand. They turn to coal dust as soon as they fall, but they're far enough away from the bank that Protesilaus can't use the collective injuries—because Dream knows there are injuries—to heal himself.

“Rude of you,” Protesilaus says, scowling now, as Zephyrus circles above them. His answering strike jars up Dream's bad arm, making him grit his teeth as he dodges away, shifting his grip. He can't rely on his dominant hand right now, which is a problem, but as long as he keeps Protesilaus on the defensive, it's fine.

The sun is slowly being blocked out by the clouds of smoke, turning the air around them a hazy yellow. Dream might be immune to most powers, but he's not immune to pollution, and it gets harder and harder to breathe as time goes on. Right now, he needs to keep Protesilaus and Zephyrus busy, because the longer his team can work without fighting, the better. He wheezes, catches another blow that reverberates through his bones like a bell, and teleports to try and strike at Protesilaus's back.

He doesn't get the chance. Like they were waiting for him to do that, Zephyrus drops like a stone, slamming into his back and sending him sprawling. A second later, he's across the roof again, climbing to his feet, but they aren't waiting. With a thunderous clap of his wings, Zephyrus launches off the roof again, arms wrapped tight around Protesilaus's chest as he carts him off into the sky as well.

The smoke hides them from view before long. Dream struggles to catch his breath, white armor and white skin stained with red, his arm still bleeding sluggishly even if his cheek has scabbed over with ash and clotted blood. He can hear the thud-thud-thud of the news copters, the wail of sirens approaching the fire, and nothing else.

His watch was on the rooftop. He's going to be out of the loop until he can get another one.

“Fuck,” Dream whispers, staggering upright as he sheathes his sword. He needs to rejoin his team and do what damage control he can; whatever the Syndicate wanted with this strike, there's no way for him to find out now.

His arm is wrapped, clear liquid bandage smeared over the slice on his cheek, and an inhaler in his pocket for the rattle in his lungs. He's better off than poor George, who's been hacking up black for the last few hours and is on bedrest for the next three days. Sapnap and Erebus are fine; nether hybrids handle smoke and heat far easier than plain old humans like George. Like the hostages.

“Fifteen fucking casualties,” Schlatt snarls, slamming his hand on his desk. Dream does not flinch, but the muscle in his jaw ticks. “Fifteen fucking casualties, and at *least* two hundred people in the hospital right now complaining about smoke inhalation. You wanna fucking explain that one to me, Hermes?”

“We responded as swiftly as we could,” Dream says, like he’s been saying for the last twenty minutes. Two hours spent on the ground helping emergency crews, three more hours in the infirmary, the barest couple minutes to change into jeans and a hoodie leaving only his mask and sword on, and now it’s mid-afternoon, the sun blinding through Schlatt’s west-facing windows, and Dream is tired.

He’s tired. He hurts. He’s furious that they couldn’t stop it and furious with *himself* for not catching onto the trap soon enough. The last thing he wants is to stand here in Schlatt’s office and get browbeaten over something that *he couldn’t help*, but here he is.

“‘We responded—’ Listen to yourself. Listen to yourself. *We responded* bull fucking shit you responded, you didn’t even figure out why they were there! They didn’t rob shit, they barely took any hostages, and you *responded*, oh, yeah. Great response, Hermes. Great fucking response.”

The muscle in his jaw ticks again. “Erebus wasn’t able to give us much of a briefing before we were on the ground, and we prioritized the civilians over—”

“Over *what*, figuring out what the Syndicate was planning?” The sneer on Schlatt’s face makes him ugly. It takes every ounce of willpower for Dream to keep from sneering back, knowing that his own teeth are much sharper.

“Yes, actually.” He smiles instead, which shows off his fangs just as nicely. “Whatever they’re planning, civilians come first. You’d remember that, if you hadn’t drowned your hero years in alcohol, Schlatt.”

There’s a long, dreadful silence, broken only by a timid knock at the door.

“Come in,” Dream says, locking eyes with Schlatt despite how dangerous it is for both of them. The door creaks open a second later, the timid shuffling steps enough to tell him who it is without looking.

“Um.” Lethe makes a low, throaty warble, one that Dream wants to respond to on instinct, then coughs. “Um. The Captain—The Captain needs you, President. She said it was urgent?”

With a scowl, Schlatt shoves away from his desk, storming past Dream on his way to the door. He pauses in the doorway, blazing with sunlight, Dream’s shadow at his feet, and says, “This isn’t over. You stay right fucking there until I get back.”

The door slams behind him. Dream glares at it, wondering if he’s feeling bold enough to disobey a direct order from one of the two people who can give them to him, then shakes his head and looks back at the desk. It’s a mess, scattered with paperwork and proposals, an overflowing ashtray and mostly empty bottle of whiskey sitting damningly on the corner of the desk. He knows that if he opened the cabinets on the left wall, there would be more bottles, both full and empty, a safe hidden behind one of the largest (and cheapest) vintages.

“Slob,” he mutters, reaching over to push a nearly collapsed stack of papers back into order. That nearly dislodges a different stack, and he teleports to the other side of the desk to grab that one, pushing it back into place, sending a notebook falling to the ground.

With an aggrieved sigh, he bends down to pick it up—and freezes.

need the other book to take the powers permanently, is scrawled in Schlatt's drunken handwriting next to a diagram of a room in Pandora's Vault. A room Dream recognizes because he'd tested its efficacy on passive powers like his own; Sapnap's burn had lingered for weeks, proving that outside influence could be used while a prisoner's powers were still suppressed. Dream still has the scar.

He flips back to the beginning of the notebook, breath catching in his soot-smothered lungs.

cant revive without fire

lava effective

more intact the body the better

spawnproofing?

five minutes maximum

Notes, and notes, and more notes. Diagrams with some of them, copies of the prison's floorplans, names and ages and powers. A list of powers, with times written next to them. A list of names, with the words *timing was wrong*, *send condolences to relatives* written in the same lazy, careless hand.

Dream stares at the names of prisoners, villains, hybrids and people with power he'd arrested.

"Fuck me, you just cannot listen to instructions, can you?"

His head snaps up. Schlatt is standing there, flooded with light, eyes half-lidded and a look of disappointment on his face. The inhaler sits uselessly in his hoodie and he can't *breathe*, thinking of the real reason Schlatt wants the Syndicate so badly. The real reason he's so furious about Dream's inability to do anything against them but drive them off.

"What book?" he asks, voice rasping.

"You just *had* to stick your nose in it, didn't you?" Schlatt walks around the desk and Dream doesn't move, curling his fingers tighter around the notebook. When Schlatt's hand lands on his arm, it's too hot, bruising tight and burning against Dream's skin. "Couldn't just leave it alone. And now you're going to tell me that you can't just forget about it, aren't you?"

His mouth tastes like blood and ash. Dream swallows past the feeling of glass shards in his throat, and repeats, "What book?"

"Has anyone ever told you your power is the most annoying thing on the planet?" Schlatt asks conversationally, a smile on his face. It's a bad smile. It's the kind of smile that gets Dream's hackles up and makes him want to start swinging.

The door clicks, and both of them look over. Lethe stands there, looking worried. "Um, I hope I'm not interrupting but—"

“Lethe! My man!” The jovial voice makes Lethe flinch, makes Dream tense up and his eyes widen. “Come over here, Hermes and I were just discussing you.”

“What are you doing, Schlatt.” He hisses the words out as Lethe walks over, long legs carrying him across the room. The delicate masquerade mask resting on his nose does nothing to hide the confusion in his dual-colored eyes, and Lethe twists his fingers more viciously as Schlatt turns to him with a smile.

The hand on his arm releases, but Dream is too slow to realize why. Too slow to stop him as Schlatt, once the number three hero before he’d retired, draws his sword. Too slow to do anything as the sword, his sword, *Hermes’s sword* drives through Lethe’s chest just past his heart, buried to the hilt.

Schlatt’s other hand curls around Lethe’s wrist. Lethe’s lips part, blood trickling down his chin as he whispers, “Dream?”

And then he’s gone, out of Schlatt’s grasp, away from the tower with the eerie sound of teleportation. Dream’s sword goes with him. And finally, finally, his limbs move, the notebook forgotten at his feet as Dream grabs Schlatt by the jacket and slams him into the window.

“What the *fuck* Schlatt?” he shouts, slamming him again when the man just laughs in his face. “Why would you fucking *do* that? What is *wrong* with you? Are you—Do you have no —”

Hands grab him, try to yank him off. He lets out a high, rattling hiss, his eyes locked with Schlatt’s golden ones, the sun blazing around him until Dream has to squint, but he doesn’t look away. Even as the Captain finally yanks him off, even as she gets between them, even as Schlatt rests a hand on her shoulder.

Then she says, “Hermes, why would you kill Lethe?” with genuine horror, and he snaps his eyes away, staring at her.

She looks distraught. Her hand covers her mouth, tears beading in her eyes, and Schlatt’s hand rests on her shoulder comfortingly. Controllingly. The same way he’d gripped Lethe—Ranboo—just before he died. The same way he’d grabbed Dream’s arm before making a snide remark about his immunity to others’ powers.

And suddenly, he realizes what the game is: Dream goes to prison for the murder of his protege. It doesn’t matter if the truth would come out eventually, because the Captain’s testimony and Schlatt’s word would be enough to put him in there. Once he’s in Pandora’s Vault, he’s not getting back out, and whatever Schlatt is doing with the prison, with his books, no one can stop him. If he stays, if he tries to defend himself, if he yanks Schlatt’s hand off the Captain’s shoulder and begs her to believe him, he’s going to prison... and Ranboo dies for nothing.

He can’t let that happen. So he does the only thing he can do, with the Captain staring at him in horror and Schlatt’s expression falling into the calculated look of shock and dismay.

Dream runs.

new sunrise

Chapter Notes

My current rule of thumb is I'm giving myself a one chapter buffer before I post again, but uh, if you can't tell, that buffer rule might have to be increased. I may have written over ten thousand words in one day. I may have a problem.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He grunts in pain as he hits the floor of the fire escape with a clang, freezing for a second. It's been hours since he started running, and his lungs burn like the fire still consuming the bank, but only with the setting sun does he feel safe enough to stop. The Tower is in third district, up near the north end of the city and the wealthiest neighborhoods, close to the center of commerce and the offices that soar in the districts on either side. He's in sixth district now, southside, one of the poorest.

There's no sound from the apartment he landed outside. Dream draws in a ragged breath, then another, and teleports inside. He doesn't *think* anyone is following him anymore, but he's not positive. If they were, they shouldn't know he's inside.

Still, he doesn't risk trying the lights. There's no furniture in here, only dusty laminate floors and cracked drywall. When he looks up at the ceiling, black mold infests the corners, stains creeping across the expanse until it's a patchwork of odd colors. Limping, his knee screaming at him after hours of running when he should have been resting it, Dream makes his way to the bathroom. The orange glow of sunset doesn't reach back here, the only thing lighting the pitch-black room being his own faintly glowing green eyes.

In the darkness, Dream takes inventory.

He has a sprained wrist and a laceration needing thirty stitches on his right arm, a cut across his left cheek, a bruised and bloody left knee that might be twisted, and a bad case of smoke inhalation. He's wearing a black hoodie he'd thrown on at the Tower and jeans, now torn, along with sneakers, mismatched socks, a pair of boxers, and two shirts. He does not have his phone or his Federation-issue watch, but he does have the power nullifying ring with its disguise illusion resting on his left pinky.

He does not have his team. He does not have his name or reputation. He does not have any allies, or anyone he can trust when Schlatt can rewrite their thoughts (memories?) with a single touch.

He has himself. It will have to be enough.

Gingerly, he shuts the door to the bathroom, then flicks the switch. Nothing happens, and when he opens the door again, the sky is dark and getting darker. A test of the faucet reveals

the water is cut off as well, but electricity and water are two things Dream can manage easy enough; it's not an *official* part of the Federation hero track curriculum, but he wasn't born a hero either. He's not Sapnap, with a father who's a founding member, or George, born to wealth and leisure in district two. Stealing utilities is something Dream's done before.

That's a task for in the morning though. For now, he limps until he's under the window, streetlights and neon advertisements lighting up the night outside. It shines in past the fire escape, through the window into this one-room apartment that's been empty for so long the landlord probably forgot it exists. Dream stares at his paper white skin as colored lights play over it—

("You're half something else," he says with interest, picking up one of Ranboo's hands in his own. The poor kid is twelve and already shooting up like a weed; Dream hasn't got the ender height, but he suspects Ranboo will.

"Oh," Ranboo says, tearing up even though he tries to hide it. There are already furrows gouged deeply in his cheeks, testament to his heritage, and Dream winces at the sight. It takes sustained water to burn him that badly, but every hybrid is different.

"No, it's okay, kid." He smiles as wide as he can, carefully looking at Ranboo's nose instead of into his mismatched eyes. "That just makes you double special, see? I'm just a boring ender hybrid, but you get to be an ender hybrid and *more*."

"But you're white," Ranboo says, his other hand petting the tuft of Dream's tail where it lays in his lap.

"Well, I get to be a *little* special," Dream concedes.)

—and gives the ring around his smallest finger a twist. The unnatural pale deepens, warms, turns golden and slightly freckled under the flickering pink and blue. When he looks at his faint reflection in the window, the rest of him has changed too. Rounded ears, not pointed ones. Blonde hair hanging to his chin and just long enough to be pulled back in a ponytail, not white hair cut short. Human eyes, with whites and round pupils, rather than the endless expanse of color with thin black slits, but they're still green. He'll give up every other part of himself but he won't give up that.

The cut on his face remains. Dream makes a mental note to himself to grow his hair out until it matches the length on the illusion. It's easier if the visual and the physical match as much as possible, even if these disguises can warp reality enough to fool the touch of a hand.

Used to be, everyone wore things like this. Hybrids aren't rare, but they don't make up a large part of the population either, and they're dangerous. It was safer for everyone if they looked human, if they kept their nonhuman halves suppressed until reaching for the power was a difficulty, if they pretended. Things changed when the Federation was founded by the original five, and then changed more as society became more tolerant, as hybrids went around looking like themselves, but. Sometimes it was safer to hide, still.

For now, that serves Dream's purposes. Despite wearing the ring every day, he hadn't used this disguise in almost three years. Not since the last time he'd snuck out with George and

Sapnap to a fucking... concert or something, he can't even remember anymore. It had been dumb, but it had been so worth it too.

He smiles down at the ring, running his thumb over the iron band, then lets the smile drop.

In the morning, he'll hook up water and electricity. Showers hurt, but they hurt less if he takes them fast and doesn't let the wet linger. He needs to get a phone, and something to sleep on, and food. Most of all, he needs money; he's cut off from his funds and his savings, and he doesn't dare use anything but cash. Without any identification or documentation, he'll have to acquire funds under the table anyways.

Maybe it's for the best that he hasn't answered to anything but Hermes for a long time. He won't be up near the Tower, and he knows what Sapnap and George both look like. There's only one other person who called him by name and he's—

He bites the inside of his mouth until it bleeds, until he has a good reason for the tears stinging the corners of his eyes. They won't burn him the way Ranboo's always had, but he can't afford to be crying anyways. Right now, he needs to plan, to figure out a way forward, and only once he's finished the job will he let himself relax. Break down. Grieve.

Until then, the emotion is useless, so Dream locks it somewhere deep in his heart and hides the key.

His knee is even more swollen in the morning. After an extended internal debate, he unwraps his arm and uses the bandage to help support his knee instead, pulling it tight before pinning the bandages in place. The gauze covering his stitches is bloody and soaked with yellowish plasma, but the cut looks to be healing alright, so he just leaves the gauze in a pile on the bathroom sink and decides it'll be fine under his sleeve for now.

First things first: he needs new clothes. Better clothes. *Different* clothes. The black hoodie will do for now, but he's going to ditch the style entirely first chance he gets; not that he thinks George and Sapnap will come down to sixth district looking for him, but Hermes had been known for his casual wear around the Tower.

A thought occurs to him on that subject, and he tucks it away for consideration later.

Sixth is a bad place for him to go looking for clothes. Not because they don't have stores—there's a few different bulk stores, the big box store, a shitty mall that's seen better days and consignment shops crowded against laundromats and family-owned takeaway places. No, the reason he heads northeast is because Dream feels like garbage shoplifting down in sixth, where a lot of people struggle to make ends meet as it is. He doesn't feel the slightest bit of remorse doing that in first, not when he's seen the amount of shrinkage budgeted for the department stores up there.

When he was younger, lifting food and things small enough to sell without being caught, he'd been a lot stealthier about what he was doing. He'd been *distinctive*, pale as snow with his tail and his bright green eyes, and distinctive meant he couldn't afford to be caught.

He's older now, wiser to how the system works, and most importantly, human looking. Dream walks into a mid-range department store in the *nice* mall, hood up and hands in his pockets as he makes his way back to the men's section. Can't afford for the scars to be visible, and this disguise illusion kept them, so he picks up a few turtlenecks on clearance, a set of fingerless leather gloves, a pretty nice wallet. Jeans next, just copies of the same pair that can be swapped out at will, and then a set of black cargo pants with a bunch of pockets. A belt, simple and unadorned and a side satchel big enough to carry almost everything if he rolls the clothes up tight.

A lime green hoodie, not quite the same color as his old cape but close enough.

Then he walks into a fitting room. At no point does he make his destination secret, nor does he slink around the store. He moves with confidence, like he belongs and like the idea of not paying has never occurred to him, and once he's in a stall, he shuts his eyes and tries to remember the layout of the mall. It's going to stretch his powers to their limit, because he's not Ranboo and he's never had the range, but...

Three minutes after Dream walks into the fitting rooms, he walks out of a bathroom on the opposite side of the mall. He's underestimated the size of his bag a little, but he rolls the old clothes up in his black hoodie and tucks it under his elbow, leaving the stall like a man with no concerns. That's his clothes sorted for the next couple months at least; if the summer gets too hot and he hasn't already dethroned Schlatt, he'll make another stop.

(Dream does not allow himself to consider that he might still be a fugitive come winter.)

Second order of business is getting money and a phone. He could probably steal the phone and the sim card, but he's not sure he'll be able to do it unseen. The money he'll need either way, so that's a high priority. And his stomach growls as he passes by a pretzel stand, so, food, he needs to think about that too.

Old habits come back to him. Seven years as a hero, five years of training beforehand, and it still comes back to him easy as breathing. He slips a wallet from an inattentive teen's pocket and into his own, then a second, then a third, pulling the cash out and leaving the wallets behind on top of trash cans, benches, retaining walls. It looks like they've just been dropped that way. Can't blame anyone for taking money from an obviously lost wallet.

He makes a lazy loop of the upper floor of the mall, building his own collection until it's enough to justify stopping for a pretzel. It's buttery, salty, and the first thing he's eaten since, fuck, breakfast yesterday. In almost no time at all, it's gone, his stomach still growling, and he's thinking about getting another when a television screen catches his attention.

The electronics shop is one of those that keeps a couple televisions up front, even though it's been ages since anyone needed to see the wonders of technology before buying a screen. He needs to go inside to buy a burner phone, but Dream finds himself rooted on the spot, staring at the breaking news report running on repeat across all stations.

His face, in the little domino mask that does nothing to hide it. The words '**ACCUSED OF MURDER**' spread bold and red across the screen. And below, on the ticker, a bounty increasing by the minute on any information about his whereabouts.

Suddenly, Dream isn't hungry anymore. The lingering salt on his lips tastes like blood, not butter, and all he can see is Schlatt's smile, Ranboo's shocked expression, the devastation on the Captain's face as she let the murderer hold her close for comfort.

"I always knew there was something off about him," says a woman next to him, leaning close with a conspiratorial air. "I mean, he was a little too good to be true, don't you think?" Zephyrus turned. It was only a matter of time before Hermes did too."

"Maybe they'll stop naming number one heroes after messenger gods," Dream says, voice rasping and cracked from the fight he was in yesterday. "Seems like it might be causing that."

She harumphs softly, clearly offended that he's not taking this seriously, then brushes past him. It takes him another few minutes, but he enters the store eventually and uses stolen twenties and tens to buy a cheap smartphone. He gets a simcard with reloadable minutes too, memorizing his new number but caring far more about the ability to access the internet now.

Clothes. New phone. Time for food.

There aren't any grocery stores near the apartment he's squatting in. He's limping pretty bad by the time he finishes checking, his only options a few convenience stores with snacks and a gas station. He heads four streets over to a superstore that squats, ugly and encroaching, in the middle of a parking lot that could easily be three apartment buildings instead, then goes inside to buy overpriced staples and some underwear.

On further consideration, he picks up a skillet, two pots, some kitchenware, and blankets as well.

Getting everything up the fire escape is agony. He risks turning off the power nullifier long enough to teleport most of the way, and then into the apartment. The power is still off and so are the lights, but it's just barely past noon and the light coming through the window is enough. He sets his bags down, then goes to find the stolen tool chest he'd stashed before going on the hunt for a decent place to buy food.

Water is surprisingly easy; he finds the hookup without trouble, and skimming off his neighbors is unethical but doable. Electricity is harder, and it's almost two hours later before he manages to get it running to his apartment without interruption. He adds burns along his fingertips to his mental checklist of injuries, and adds a first aid kit to his list of things he needs to buy.

The water runs rusty brown for almost six minutes when he turns on all the faucets to clear them out. It's disgusting. It also never quite runs fully clear, which is worrying, but after ten minutes it's clear enough and he fills a newly purchased cup and gives it a taste. Metal, dirt, something grossly organic. Hard to tell if it's the building's pipes or just sixth district water as a whole, but he spits it out with a grimace and makes a promise to himself to boil anything he drinks going forward.

When he rolls up his sleeve and checks his stitches, they're irritated and red. Dream frowns down at them, running his thumb just to the side of the sensitive skin, and wonders how

much worse they look with his ring off. Maybe he needs to prioritize that first aid kit.

The problem is, standing hurts. Walking hurts. Swinging his legs out the window and taking the steps down to the next landing *hurts*, bad enough that he ends up sitting with one leg dangling over the edge, the other laid flat so he can press shaking hands to the hot, swollen mess of his knee. He needs to get ice, he needs a real brace, he needs some painkillers, and he needs to *stop walking* for the rest of the day.

His phone buzzes in his pocket and he pulls it out, checking one of the RSS feeds he's subscribed to. Sightings of former hero Hermes in fourth district, apparently. The longer he waits to stop Schlatt, the worse things spin out of control.

Dream forces himself to his feet and climbs the rest of the way down.

He's sweating, shaking a little when he limps into a convenience store and buys a first aid kit and some cleaning supplies. The person behind the counter doesn't question him, just hands him his change and a bag big enough to carry all of it. The prospect of standing long enough to actually cook food for himself is not just daunting, but growing actively concerning. Dream isn't sure he can do it.

That doesn't mean he's not *hungry*, but he's pretty sure he is completely incapable of standing long enough to clean his pots and make rice, which is a problem.

It's just outside of a little bakery that his knee finally gives out on him, potted roses and the sweet scent of sugar witnessing his demise. Dream swears, sharp and vicious, throwing one arm out to catch himself as the other moves to tuck into his side with his bag of, well, not very fragile things—and then he stops falling entirely, a warm arm around his waist and an even warmer hand curled over his fingers where they're tight on the handle of the plastic bag.

“Hey,” comes a low, drawling voice, oddly flat, “you, uh, you seem to be failing to walk, which is not a great look on you right now.”

“Oh fuck off,” Dream groans, before coughing harshly as his much-abused lungs decide now is perfect to make their complaints known. Still, he's not going to object to the help, and he ends up leaning most of his weight back against the chest of the stranger that caught him.

“What's wrong with your leg?” An observant stranger to boot. Dream glances down at his knee, half-cocked as he keeps pressure off that leg, and modifies his opinion slightly. The stranger would have to be blind to miss how hard he's favoring it.

“I got injured, idiot, what do you think happened?” Maybe he should be nicer, considering that he's currently using this guy as a crutch, but that's not going to happen. Dream coughs again, pressing his face into his elbow as he hacks up soot from yesterday's fight. Was it really only yesterday?

“Okay, I'll give you that one. That was on me for askin'. My bad.” His monotone savior shifts, and then Dream is being half-led, half-carried through the bakery doors and deposited in a chair next to the window. Both the chair and the table it's next to have delicate ironwork filigree, and Dream stares at the lattices for a second before looking up.

The man who caught him is a few inches taller—a fact Dream resents immensely—and broader shouldered, with braided pastel pink hair that reaches his waist. If the ease with which he'd moved Dream hadn't been evidence enough, then the muscles that he'd felt while leaning against the chest said that Mr. Pink Hair liked to work out, maybe do some martial arts. There's an ease to his movement that's familiar, the kind of ease that only fighters and dancers have; it's not something that can be learned by lifting weights and doing crunches. He's wearing a pair of thin rectangular glasses, a flowing white poet's shirt and black jeans, and for a single absurd moment, Dream thinks *ah, a Blood God stan*.

It's a dumb thought to have, but it makes him snicker anyways.

Unfortunately, that catches mystery man's attention, and he frowns at Dream—even his frowns are handsome, what the fuck, who let this happen—before turning towards the counter and saying, “Hey, uh, Niki, do you have some ice or somethin’ we can use?”

From the back, a pretty young woman comes bustling out, her hair dark at the roots but bleached a shade of pink only a hint bluer than the shade Mr. Pink Hair has. Dream clears his throat, intending to protest, especially with the bakery mostly empty and no crowd around to pressure him into accepting, but she says, “Of course, Techno. Just give me a second.”

Techno. His mystery man's name is Techno. What a stupid name that is.

“Techno?” Dream says as she heads into the back again, and he doesn't hide his disbelief at all. An adorable shade of red brushes across the handsome bastard's face, a shade that almost matches his—huh—red eyes.

Red eyes. Maybe the pink hair is natural?

“Short for Technoblade,” the man says gruffly, his voice a little deeper out of embarrassment. “Niki and I, we go way back, so she gets to use the nickname. Everyone else calls me Technoblade.”

“Okay, *Techno*.” He rolls his eyes, injured leg extending as a plastic bag of ice is handed over the counter. The man scowls at him, but his hands are impossibly gentle as he drapes the bag over Dream's knee.

“You're awful sarcastic for a guy who can't walk right now,” Techno says, shifting Dream's foot into his lap. “Do I get a name for you, or am I coming up with the most offensive one I can think of?”

“I'd love to hear you try. Dream.”

This time, it's Techno that rolls his eyes. “I have much better things to do than dream up more inventive things to offend you with, I'm gonna stick with what I've got.”

And that—for the first time in what feels like forever, that makes him laugh. He busts up, wheezing as he fights for breath, hacking up a lung as he ends up double over with a hand clamped over his mouth. There are tears running down his cheeks, just enough to feel warm on his skin, and the entire time, Technoblade looks at him like he's lost his goddamn mind.

Which. Maybe he has, a little bit.

“That’s—” He chokes, wheezes, thumps his uninjured arm against the table as he fights for breath. “That’s my *name*, asshole. Dream Wastaken.”

The red looks even better on Techno’s face this time, his eyes going wide. His deep voice stumbles as he tries to stammer out something to defend himself and Dream just laughs harder, laughs until his own face is bright red too. It feels good to laugh, after everything he’s been through.

“Are you, like, okay?” Techno asks warily when Dream can finally breathe again, soft gulping wheezes that leave him shaking. His hand is covered in black, and he really might need the inhaler he left back up in his apartment. “Not, uh, mentally, that’s clearly a no, but you’re kind of...”

“Hot?” It’s all he can do not to bust up laughing again at the look on Techno’s face.

“...No.” The longer this conversation goes on, the more Techno looks like he regrets keeping Dream from breaking his neck on the sidewalk. But he still hasn’t dropped Dream’s foot out of his lap, or yanked the bag of ice off his knee.

“I got hurt in that stupid bank thing yesterday,” Dream says, because the bank had been in fifth district and it wasn’t unreasonable to think he had an account there. And because he doesn’t want to think up an acceptable lie, not when he’s obviously still hacking smoke up out of his lungs on top of the injured leg.

“You were inside?” Techno asks, his eyes inspecting Dream’s face intently. Like he’s looking for something, which makes Dream uncomfortable for reasons he can’t quite articulate. Reasons beyond the fact that Techno’s red gaze keeps trying to lock onto his eyes, and Dream can only dodge it so well before it gets obvious what he’s doing.

“Nah, I was nearby, but you know. Panicking crowds. Big goddamn fire. Pretty easy to get hurt anyways.” Dream gives him a lopsided smile and, after a moment longer, Techno relaxes.

“Maybe I should walk you home,” he says, and now *Dream* is the one that’s tense. Because he’s squatting, not actually renting, and that means he doesn’t have a key to the front of the building. Or his own apartment, for that matter. So even if the offer is appreciated—and Dream has heard of much worse fates than having a handsome man carry him home—he can’t afford to take Techno up on it.

“Not that I don’t appreciate it,” Dream says, trying to tug his leg out of Techno’s lap, “but I barely know you, dude. I’m not bringing some strange guy to my house, what am I, an idiot?”

The lift of Techno’s eyebrows says ‘yes’, but then he looks at Dream’s beat up shoes, the brand new jeans and sweater which, fuck, yeah Dream sees the tag poking out of it now, and the ragged blond hair hanging around Dream’s face. And he says, “Do you... *need* a place to stay?”

If he'd asked that yesterday...

"No," Dream says firmly. "I have a house. I have a great house. It's the best house a man could ask for."

"Uh-huh." Techno looks somehow even *less* impressed. "And your house goes to a school in Canada, and that's why we can't meet her."

"I—I have a house!" His voice cracks on that, and it's only one part embarrassment, because the rest of it is—

He does have a house. Once you're in the Tower, you're set for life; he was the first, the very first hero to get confirmed when they dropped the age limit to sixteen, the flagship hero of his generation and the one all the new kids looked up to. His apartment in the Tower had been his private space, but it had also been a symbol of his success, with its view over the lake and the kitchen big enough to cook for himself and his friends. He'd been patched up there, gotten into fights there, had game nights and movie nights and nights where it was just the three of them hanging out there.

He'd baked Ranboo's first birthday cake there. They'd celebrated Tommy's hero promotion there. And it's gone now. Dream knows Schlatt; even if he clears his name, even if he does everything right and gets his life back, that apartment has been ripped to shreds and all his things, all his memories, torn from its walls.

"I have a house," he repeats, softly, throat tight from something other than the remnants of smoke in his lungs.

"Okay," Techno says after a moment, something twisting at the edge of his mouth. It's not pity, not quite, but it's not something that makes Dream feel good either.

There's a soft click of a plastic box on the table, and Dream looks over as the woman from earlier—Niki—smiles at him. There's a warm pastry steaming up the container, and his mouth waters at the sight before he says, "I, uh, how much is—"

"On the house," she says firmly. "Since Techno ran you over in front of my bakery and all."

"That isn't—" Techno sighs. "Yeah okay. Put it on my tab instead. I think this is as good as your knee's gonna get with ice for now, the best thing for it is rest."

This time, when he tries to pull his leg away, Techno lets him. The knee doesn't ripple with pain when Dream sets his foot on the ground, and he's able to lever himself up at the table with only a bit of stiffness. It won't last, it's not perfect, but it'll do to get him home.

"Thanks," he says, as Techno stands and hands him his bag and the takeaway container. "I do appreciate the help, man."

"Yeah, yeah," Techno mutters, wrinkling his nose. "Try not to fall over on your way to your very real, totally exists house."

“Fuck you.” He smiles as he says it, and gives Niki a wave as he limps back outside. The feeling of eyes on him makes his instincts bristle, but he keeps moving determinedly forward until it fades. Only once he’s certain he’s not being observed does he turn back towards his building, to the shallow cut through with the fire escape he climbs up, to the mold-ridden, stained apartment he’s currently squatting in.

The smell of a chocolate croissant makes the place feel a little more homely. Still not home, but more like a place he won’t hate waking up in tomorrow morning. For now, that will have to do.

Chapter End Notes

Hermes - Dream

Zephyrus - Philza

Not a whole lot of hero action in this chapter, but y'know.

making choices

Chapter Notes

FINALLY PUTTING THAT VIGILANTE DREAM TAG TO GOOD USE LET'S GO

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As much as it drives him crazy, Dream rests his leg for a week. He's got enough food to last him, even if it's not the most enjoyable thing in the world eating plain rice and noodles with flavor packets, and his phone keeps him up to date on everything happening in the city. For a day or two, things look dodgy with his arm, but the redness fades and the slightly puffy irritation vanishes once he stops rubbing it with sweaty fabric.

He sits curled up in his blanket, with his old black hoodie for a pillow, and scrolls news feeds. The longer they go without capturing Hermes, the more the rumor mill churns, especially since Lethe's body hasn't been recovered. There's a funeral held four days after Dream runs, and he watched the livestream with a sense of misery that's hard not to drown in.

Icarus stands on the stage with Daedalus, both of them talking about the kind of man Lethe was growing into. The Captain gives a very lovely speech that hits on the things everyone knew but doesn't come close to scraping the depths underneath. Schlatt, thank fuck, does not attend, citing the search for Lethe's murderer as his reason for refraining, and both Vulcan and Somnus are on patrol on the opposite side of the city.

The day after the funeral is bad. Dream comes the closest he ever has been to walking back to the Tower and turning himself in, to telling them that he'll go along quietly with whatever fucked up scheme Schlatt has if only they'll let him lay flowers on Ranboo's grave. But his knee is fucked and he's growing more and more used to wearing the disguise instead of his real face, so in the end, he stays in his shitty apartment and plots revenge.

No. Not revenge. Justice.

There are two things Dream needs to be able to make this work long term: an identity, separate from Hermes, for him to investigate Schlatt with, and money. His secondary objective, keeping the streets mostly clean of superpowered crime while *also* keeping those criminals out of prison, is a little more complicated, but it slots neatly enough under the first two. The cargo pants, his darkest turtleneck, the belt, and the fingerless gloves get bundled up in the bright green hoodie next to his bed as his 'working clothes'. That's an identity half-figured out, but Dream knows better than to run around in nothing but a thin strip of cloth for a mask.

Wood is too heavy. He doesn't have the stuff to make ceramics work. Metal is right out for the same reason wood is, and resin has the same problems ceramics do. In the end, he lands

on paper mache, buys a shitload of glue and watches videos, steals more paper than he knows what to do with and comes up with... a lot of really ugly fucking masks, actually. Anything shaped to his face is horrifying. His attempts to do cutouts are almost equally so.

In the end, a white circle with a smile painted on is the best of the lot. He makes ten of the stupid things, reasoning that *someone* is going to try and yank it off, and turns his attention to the other problem.

Money.

Esempi's had its fair share of vigilantes, sure, but not as many as some might think. The Federation has always had a good outreach program, and honestly, Dream expects them to reach out to him in this form eventually too. Why arrest the competition when they can be bought instead?

(He can think of a few reasons why Schlatt might want vigilantes arrested. Some of the proposals that have been floated by the board make much more sense now.)

Stopping crime is not a traditionally well paying job. Not without the system of power behind it, at any rate. *Doing* crime, that's generally pretty profitable, but most vigilantes start with high-minded ideals that get crushed when their opponents are all better funded. Dream knows that going in, so he's planning for it now.

He could get a job under the table, and he hasn't ruled out the idea. Maybe he can ask Niki, the baker, if she knows anyone who needs a dishwasher or something. But for now, the easiest way for him to get money is going to be stealing it, and the easiest way to steal it without getting caught is to steal it from a *different* thief first.

Moral? Not really. *Ethical*? Debatably so. Practical? Yes. Very much so, yes.

So a week after Hermes goes missing, a week after Lethe dies, a week after Dream's whole world falls apart, a man all in black with a lime green hoodie and a white smiling mask climbs on the roof of his apartment building. He bounces on his toes a few times, testing the knee that's wrapped to hell and back for support, then rolls his wrists. There's a fire axe strapped to his back, because swords are remarkably hard to get his hands on as a civilian, and a variety of useful tools like lockpicks and zip ties tucked in his pockets.

He smooths his thumb over the power nullifier on his pinky finger, just strong enough to make teleporting difficult, not so strong that it makes him vulnerable to everyone else's powers too. Then he leaps off the roof and goes hunting.

"That is fucking *nightmarish*," says his third capture of the night, a man who calls fire almost as easily as Vulcan, whose red and blue glasses are crushed under Dream's shoe. "What the fuck are you wearing?"

"A mask? Duh." Behind it, Dream rolls his eyes. He misses his tail, the way it helped him counterbalance as he ran across rooftops, and he misses the way he could teleport without thinking about it. But there's only one white ender hybrid in the city, and he *needs* this identity to be as far from Hermes as possible.

“Well—Well—What the fuck do you want, anyhow?” The blaze hybrid swallows, throat bobbing, as Dream drops into a crouch in front of him. He’d been breaking into a Federation relay station, which Dream finds very interesting indeed.

“Information,” he says, voice muffled and head tipped slightly. It makes the man pale further. “At a later date, perhaps. Here’s the deal: I let you go. You promise not to hurt any innocent people. I come to you, maybe days from now, maybe weeks from now, and I ask you questions. You answer them. Our business at that point is concluded.”

“And if I don’t take you up on this generous offer?” He’s gotta hand it to the guy, the man has guts. No brains, considering that Dream nearly took his head off with a swing of the axe, but guts aplenty.

“Then I turn you in to the Tower and wash my hands of you. But I don’t want to do that. I suspect you don’t want me to do that either.”

They stare at each other, hollow burning pits of gold meeting the painted dots on Dream’s mask. He painted them deliberately lower than the invisible slits he sees out of, and it means that no one has met his eyes yet. It’s more of a relief than words can say.

“...Fine,” the blaze hybrid says, reluctantly. “Fine. But here, I *don’t* want you chasing me down and breaking my kneecaps or something, so just—”

He shoves a business card in Dream’s hands. On the front is The Pub, an extra e hastily whited out, with the name Jack Manifold (Owner/Bartender) printed underneath it and a business phone number. On the back, in old handwriting, a second number.

“Just call me there if you want your information,” Jack says, scared and defiant all at once. “There’s no need for all this... drama.”

“Noted,” Dream says before standing smoothly. He doesn’t miss the way Jack flinches at the movement, or the way that his eyes can’t seem to leave Dream’s mask for more than a few seconds. Is it really that scary?

Something to reflect on later. He leaps off the rooftop, and goes hunting for another crime to stop.

He doesn’t bother to buy a proper pillow or bedding. He does, eventually, acquire towels and soap, food that needs to be refrigerated, plastic containers for storing leftovers, and a few odds and ends for the rest of the apartment. It never becomes worth the cost to steal or buy a laptop, so he sticks to his phone for the internet and goes back to oldschool methods of tracking his work.

For almost four hours one day, he carefully crops and prints a map of the city, page by page, until he has a to-scale map that can be taped up on his wall if he aligns the sheets just right. Another day, he spends ten minutes printing out what he can find online about Pandora’s Vault—not much—and another two hours in the back shelves of the Esemipi City Library, where the archives are. He doesn’t find blueprints, and suspects he might have to go to City

Hall for those, but he does find legal records of who built it and when the permits were acquired. Almost as good, really.

His knowledge map takes form slowly on the wall opposite the fire escape, starting with sticky notes for key places and pins jabbed into the drywall with strings attached. There's a pattern unfolding in front of him, piece by piece, and Dream just needs enough information to make it fit.

Red threads for Schlatt, pink sticky notes to mark the prison, the Tower, and the highly guarded warehouse of contraband that only top ten heroes are told about. Green threads for Dream, and lime sticky notes to mark the Pub, Church Prime, and a few other places he's cultivated informants for his vigilante persona. Blue threads for the Syndicate, and a cyan sticky note on the bank. Just one. He doesn't have anywhere to connect the threads yet, because the Syndicate has been oddly quiet in the wake of his disappearance, but Dream knows they're connected somehow. He knows it.

Two weeks after he's started to go out, three weeks after Ranboo's death, Dream opens his news feed and finds his own face looking back at him.

Not the face of Hermes, which feels almost alien to look at now; he stares at blond hair and baggy eyes, freckled skin and human features in the mirror every morning, until the fake face feels more like his own than the real one ever did. No, the face looking back at him has two crude dots for eyes and a shaky, carefully drawn curve of a smile on a white paper-mache mask.

New Face On The Block: The Nightmare Vigilante? says the news heading, and Dream thinks *fuck* very, very softly to himself.

When he started this, he knew that he'd get some attention. He'd planned on it, even, because if people know that he's looking for information, eventually they will find their way to him. Dream wants to be a spider in the center of his tricolor web, feeling the vibrations under his toes and only striking when the prey is well and truly caught.

What he doesn't want, what he *didn't* want, was every news agency lighting up in a fervor over a shiny new toy. It's why he's only gone out at night so far. It's why he sticks to roughing up small time criminals and cutting deals with the big time crooks for information instead of jail sentences. The longer the Federation remained ignorant, the better, in his mind, but there's no way for them to ignore this.

Even worse, the media seems intent on making Nightmare happen. It's a terrible name for a hero.

"Fuck," a crooked guard whispers when he drops down in front of them, "fuck, it's Nightmare, *fuck*."

"Look man," a driver pleads, his trunk open and drugs packed within it, "I don't want to fuck with Nightmare, okay? Just cuff me and turn me in."

“Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit,” a thief yelps, his cat ears pinned as he leaps up the side of the building only slightly faster than Dream can, “I didn’t want to fuck with *Nightmare!*”

And he’s got a reputation now. Even better. Not that the reputation is a *bad* thing, necessarily, especially since Dream wants people to know that he won’t kill them, he’ll just... rough them up a little. Win every fight. Get in and out of places he should not be able to get in and out of. That’s the kind of reputation he wants.

He doesn’t really want this one, where people are shit-scared of him and he can’t even use that to get money. His mission takes priority, so he’s focused on targets that can feed him information or open up holes for someone else. There haven’t been a whole lot of stopped bank robberies for him to steal money from, and that’s hitting his finances pretty badly.

A month after Ranboo’s death, Dream sits down with a notebook and his ziplock bag of cash, then works out his budget. It’s not great. If he doesn’t start doing a little bit of night-time robbery himself, he won’t have enough to keep going for much longer.

He stares up at his knowledge wall, the thing driving him forward in the face of despair, and sighs. Nothing to do for it. Dream needs a real job.

His logic goes something like this:

1. He does not have any identifying documents or features (with his ring on.)
2. Technoblade has already planted the seed of concern in Niki’s mind.
3. He really liked that chocolate croissant.
4. Most of the businesses down here in sixth were skirting the line of legal.
5. So maybe Niki would be able to give him a job?

It’s weak logic at absolute best, but it’s what he’s got. And he wraps the caring shown in that chocolate croissant around himself like a blanket when he pulls on his nicest looking sweater and starts walking to the bakery. His hair grows faster than human hair, so he even has enough of it under the illusion to tie it all back.

Dream rehearses his pitch as he walks down the sidewalk, no longer limping even slightly. He’s got bruised knuckles and a scrape on his chin from eating shit jumping from one roof to another, but otherwise he’s as whole and healthy as they come. Which is good, because he wants to project the image of someone who knows what he’s doing and can be a valuable, if illegal, addition to the team.

The first problem is that Technoblade appears to be in Niki’s bakery again.

He’s not alone, either. There’s an *even taller* brunet slouching next to him—what is with sixth district and their freakishly tall humans?—chatting away with Niki where she stands behind the counter. The bakery is empty otherwise, and when Dream glances at the sign, it’s got a cheerful ‘Back In Fifteen!’ note hanging off it. Well, fuck. There goes that plan.

Probably he can just come back later, but his brain stalls out for a few seconds as he tries to rework his schedule, the unexpected change throwing everything haywire. He snaps back to

himself when the bell above the door chimes, and there's Techno, leaning against it and staring at him with those rose-red eyes.

"Uh, hi," Dream says, dropping his gaze as aggression skitters up his spine. He feels Techno glance away a second later, and it makes it easier to keep his shoulders relaxed and easy. "I'll come back, since it looks like Niki's busy...?"

"I mean yeah, she is, but come on in anyways," Techno says, shifting to hold the door open for him. "She sent me out here to fetch you."

Hm. That's—hm. Dream shoves his hands in his pockets and ducks inside, trying not to remember how it had felt to be held against Techno's muscular chest. He's wearing another poet's shirt, this one in pale lavender, and it looks surprisingly good with his pink hair.

Tall-and-lanky is smiling in a way that makes Dream want to punch him, so he does *not* look at that smile and turns his attention to Niki instead. She, at least, is looking sweet and friendly, not... whatever emotion is on her friend's face.

"I was wondering if I'd see you again," she says, with flour on her apron and a bit of berry juice staining her sleeve. Dream wonders if she knows. "It's been a while."

"Yeah, I, uh, I didn't really have the money to spare," he says, which is true, but also time. He didn't have the time to be sitting in a bakery with one of the best pastries he'd ever had, getting comfortable and happy instead of finding a way to get back at Ranboo's killer.

"And now you do?" says the tall man, tone faintly mocking. He has an accent that reminds Dream of George, and the shocking pain of that reminder takes his breath away.

"Not... exactly." Abruptly, he realizes that he can't do this with an audience. Dream knocks his knuckles against the counter, taking a step back. "Look, you're in the middle of something, so—"

"We are, yes, so *leave*." There's an odd inflection on the last word out of the brunet's mouth, but Dream really doesn't need to hear it twice. He can tell when he's not wanted, and he was trying to leave anyway.

When he spins to walk out though, he slams into Techno's warm chest—god, why are his muscles so good—and freezes, grabbing onto one muscled arm to keep from falling over. He can feel the way Techno's bicep flexes under his fingers as hands fall to his shoulders and the man says, "*Wilbur*. Knock it off."

The energy in the air has a feel to it that Dream can't quite grasp, tension thick enough to cut with a knife. Then, with an aggrieved sigh, the new tallest dickhead in the shop, Wilbur, says, "Fine. *You can stay*. But really, Techno, the poor man clearly doesn't want to be here with us."

Oh god what is he getting tangled up in now. Dream makes a face, unable to help himself, and feels the hands on his shoulders squeeze a little tighter before Techno's releasing him and moving away again. Leaving him standing there, alone, with only the phantom heat lingering.

“What did you need to ask?” Niki’s voice is gentle, but the look she gives Wilbur is not. Dream sighs, even if he’s perversely glad that she seems to be taking his side, and rubs the bridge of his nose between his eyes.

“I just—I just wondered if maybe you were hiring. Dishwashers, or another baker or something.” Not that he really wants to be washing dishes, down that path lies first degree burns, but whatever. “And if you’re not, maybe you know someone who is?”

She looks at him now, hazel eyes taking him in. Dream carefully looks slightly behind her head, and doesn’t jump when she asks, “Have you ever worked in a bakery before?”

“No, but I know how to bake. I used to do it a lot for my friends before—before some things changed.” Dream takes a breath and meets her eyes long enough to fulfill social obligation before letting his gaze slide off hers again. “I don’t have any papers, and I can’t set up a direct deposit or anything, but I can work.”

There’s a soft, scoffing noise from behind him, one that makes his shoulders jerk up and his neck burn, but Niki’s smile is kind and understanding. “Do you at least have an address I can put down for my tax returns later?”

He hesitates. To be honest, he’s not actually sure what the street address of his building is, and he’s only entered the apartment from the window; whether it has a door number or even a mailbox is up in the air. And the last thing he wants is to bring attention to the fact someone is living there, in case the landlord realizes and tries to kick him out.

“Would a P.O. box work?” he asks instead, because *that* he can acquire with cash. Probably.

“That will work,” Niki says firmly, shooting another hard look at Wilbur. Then she digs a sheet of paper out from under her counter, an application, and hands it over. It’s a little dusty, like she hasn’t bothered asking for help in a long time, and Dream folds it carefully into thirds. “Fill that out, bring it back to me, and show up at... oh, we open at seven, so six? And I can show you the ropes.”

“Cool. Um. Thank you.” It inadequate for how much she’s doing for him, but she smiles at him anyways, and Dream smiles back.

Then he gets the *hell* out of dodge, because Wilbur is a dickhead and the longer he stays under the weight of that mocking stare, the more he wants to turn around and lash out. Dream can’t even blame that one on his ender heritage, because he’d want to punch Wilbur’s face in even *without* eyes on him. Asshole.

“So, uh,” Techno clears his throat and Dream jumps nearly a foot in the air. “...Okay. I thought you heard me follow you out. Anyways. Do you, uh, *actually* have a P.O. box, or were you going to go get one?”

If he weren’t wearing his disguise, his hair would be puffed and tail lashing. As it is, his skin crawls with the phantom desire to bristle, and Dream has to take a moment to get his head in order before he says, “I was just gonna go get one. I can pay for it in cash, right?”

“You need ID to get one.” Something like sympathy flickers over Techno’s face at the way Dream tenses over that. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Look, the post office isn’t more than a ten minute walk from here. I’ll go with you, we can take it out in my name, and I’ll just give you the key.”

“...Why?” Dream asks after too long, his heart pounding and his fingers curled so tight around the application that it crumples a little.

“You look like you need the help,” Techno says. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“I’m not homeless, you know.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I have a house!”

“I believe you.”

He gives himself a break from vigilante work for the first couple days, focusing on keeping himself in shape for the bakery instead. Niki has him on the morning shift, where he’s most useful, and back in the kitchens to help bake. The first day is just learning recipes, learning inventory, how she likes her kitchen run, but once she’s certain that he isn’t going to fuck up her food, she starts letting him take over certain things. Not everything; she handles the more delicate pastries, and anything that gets baked after the morning setup or before evening close is all her.

But he gets to handle the coffee cakes, the muffins, the brownies with nut toppings, and the quiches that go into the display case. The decorated cakes, that’s still Niki’s domain, but she makes noises like she might start letting Dream do the cakes as well, and he’s pretty content with that.

It’s good work, and it’s soothing. He shifts his sleep schedule so he’s curled up and dozing in the afternoons, then starts working nights again.

Building up his web of information is finally paying dividends, and it’s four days after he gets his new job that Dream finds himself in the back rooms of a Federation satellite office, digging through files. According to one of his petty criminals, there’s been a suspicious number of Tower couriers coming to this location, all of them with thin brown envelopes that they never bring back with them.

He was never involved with the admin side, not beyond helping the Captain arrange patrol schedules or setting up the fundraising dinners with important donors, but Dream remembers the couriers. Failing out of the hero track didn’t mean someone couldn’t work for the Federation anymore, it just meant finding a different path. A lot of the kids who couldn’t make it as heroes ended up as couriers instead—still a dangerous job, because they were transporting sensitive documents and packages across the city, but less likely to get them killed than going toe to toe with a villain.

There's nothing in the back office's files to indicate *what* is being brought here, though. Or why here, specifically. It's not the closest satellite office to the prison, since it's in seventh district, but it's also not the closest office to Las Nevadas either—which is the only thing in seventh district Dream figures needs watching. It's a little nothingburger of an office, come to think of it.

"What are they bringing here?" he whispers to himself in the dark, the beam of his flashlight bobbing over papers as he tries to find some kind of connection.

He doesn't get answers, but he does find some clue as to why in the manager's office on the second floor. These Federation locations, scattered through every district, were meant for filing reports of superpowered crimes, for filing insurance claims, for putting in applications to join the Federation, and for airing grievances with the system. That's a lot of personal information coming in that can't go out again, so there's a shredder every ten feet, it feels like.

This office's manager also has a shredder behind their desk. In it, damningly, are the shreds of a brown envelope and whatever papers it had contained.

He dumps it all into a garbage bag, then ties it off and hefts it up. Lightweight enough that it's not a difficulty to carry it back to the roof, where he pauses to catch his breath and plan his next move. Does he go straight home to paste these papers back together, or does he do a quick patrol?

In his defense, seventh district is almost as packed with neon and billboards as sixth is, especially with Las Nevadas on its border. That's why he doesn't notice the pink glow until it's too late, alerted instead by the scuff of a heeled boot against the roof behind him.

"So," drawls Protesilaus, "you're the one everyone is talking about."

Dream turns, heart in his throat, and stares. He knows, better than anyone, that the Syndicate operates in the dark; that's his old patrol schedule, seven at night to four in the morning, every fourth night off so that his team could get a decent few hours of shuteye. He knows he's in Syndicate territory, because if the Tower has a monopoly on the north side of the city, the Syndicate has its claws buried deep in the south side. He knows, and yet he still isn't expecting to run into their most dangerous member this soon.

"Protesilaus," he says, trying to keep his tone neutral and respectful. He isn't a Federation hero right now, and that makes them something like colleagues.

From the way the wither hybrid tenses, his black skull mask tipping, maybe that's a mistake. "...How do you know that name?"

"That *is* what you're called, isn't it?" Behind his mask, Dream sweats. Sure, the press calls him Blood God, and so do most of the heroes, and basically everyone except Dream and the Captain, but—okay. When he thinks about it like that, maybe he fucked up a little.

"And you're what?" The pink soulfire flickers and flows around his head, like hair being blown in an invisible wind. "My Nightmare?"

Oh, he really hates that name. It sounds pretty good coming from Protesilaus, something Dream sets to the side to unpack later, but he hates that name. And then it hits him, like lightning, that he doesn't need to clear comms. He doesn't need to be professional. *Hermes* had to remember that everything was recorded and the more information he gave the enemy, the more they could use against him.

Nightmare doesn't have that problem. So Dream grins and says, "If you're Protesilaus, maybe I'm your Hector."

Silence overtakes the space between them. The hollow pits of Protesilaus's mask meet the blank, unseeing dots of Dream's own, and the hand on the netherite sword doesn't twitch. Dream worries that maybe he's made *too* obvious of a threat there—not that he wants to threaten the Syndicate, but he's not on their side. He just wants to make that clear.

When Protesilaus speaks again, there's an odd note in his voice as he asks, "Do you want to be the Patroclus to my Achilles instead?"

Does he. Does he what.

Dream stares at Protesilaus. Protesilaus stares back, and even if Dream can't see the top half of his face, he can *tell* that the man is dying on the inside. He *could* just turn around and run, leaving them both to suffer with the awkwardness, but he takes pity on the poor socially stunted bastard and pulls his axe off his hip.

"Do you want to fight and pretend like that didn't just happen?" he offers.

"*Please*," Protesilaus says, sounding pained, before drawing his sword and lunging forward.

He's had a couple weeks to get familiar with the feel of an axe in his hand instead of a sword, but this is the true test. Despite making the first strike, Protesilaus is wary and careful, refusing to draw close when Dream sways back. If they're going to fight, to really fight, then he's going to have to bring the heat.

Behind his mask, Dream grins and lunges, swinging his axe down. It catches on the blade of the sword, bounces back, and he's already swinging for a second strike, adrenaline burning in his veins.

Protesilaus clearly isn't expecting him to go on the attack like this, and for good reason—people avoid getting too close when the merest touch means death. But *Dream* doesn't have to worry about that, and if *Nightmare* seems a little suicidal as a result, well. It can't hurt his reputation. It certainly can't make him look worse.

"You got a death wish or something?" Protesilaus demands when Dream hooks the blade of his axe over the hilt of the sword, swinging his arm low and forcing the sword low too. His mask is barely inches from the hollow nose and tusks of the skull resting on Protesilaus's brow, and the soulfire whipping around them both is warm like a kiss, not burning.

"You're the one that leapt onto the shore before everyone else," Dream says, muscles straining to keep that sword from whipping back up and slicing through his neck. "Do you?"

He sees Protesilaus's lips part, hears him breathe in sharply as the pink glow around them gets a little brighter. And then suddenly, he breaks away, twisting his sword out from under Dream's axe as he bounds back a few feet.

"Stay out of our business, Hector," he says before spinning and leaping to a rooftop too high for Dream to follow. Not without teleporting after him, at any rate, and right now Dream wants everyone to think that he's just an overconfident human.

Huh. He thinks that's the first time he's come close to winning a fight against Protesilaus.

Weird.

Chapter End Notes

Icarus - Tommy
Daedalus - Tubbo
Lethe - Ranboo
The Captain - Puffy
Vulcan - Sapnap
Somnus - George
Hermes/Nightmare - Dream
Protesilaus - Technoblade

At some point, I should probably get around to finishing and posting some of the character designs for this. Technoblade's wither form is five kinds of fucked up and I love it.

consequences

Chapter Notes

Techno POV this time! And a face we haven't seen in a while.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's quiet in the infirmary. They didn't have private rooms for a long time, because most of the injuries that land them in bed are the kind they call Ponk in for. He's paid well for his time and effort, and they're back on their feet again within hours of coming down. So it's just been a couple beds, some basic first aid, and the things needed for patching themselves up when it isn't serious.

They added the private room a month ago. Techno's spent more time here than is probably healthy.

The heart monitor beeps softly, displaying oxygen levels and respiration rates as well. The brain monitor is distressingly inactive; there's *someone* in there, but no real activity, and Ponk hasn't been able to give them a timeline on when that might change. Hybrids, especially hybrids that mix and mingle heritage from two different dimensions, are uncharted waters for medical science. Even a healing gift can't fix that.

He watches the monitor like it might change anyways, the power nullifier in his right ear keeping his wither powers in check. One of Ranboo's hands rests in his own, the claws in need of a clipping and the skin black like the void of the End. It's long-fingered and terribly fragile, especially in Techno's hands, but he keeps holding it anyways. Talking is supposed to help, but he has very little new to talk about.

"Hey Ranboo," he says, running his thumb over the pads of fingers starting to lose their calluses, "it's me again. Technoblade. Uh, you probably knew that, but I feel like maybe I should say it every time. Just in case."

There's no response, just the soft rise and fall of Ranboo's chest. He's healed. He's fully healed; even if Ponk hadn't said it, Techno would *know*, senses damage and pain in all the flaring souls around him, feeds off it the same way he feeds off death. Ranboo is physically perfectly okay, but there's some connection that still needs to be made in his brain, and there's nothing Techno can do to fix that.

Some days, he's okay with what he is. This is not one of those days.

"Some stuff's been going on since the last time we talked. Uh, your mentor, Dream, the guy that stabbed you, they're saying he's got a safehouse set up in first and he's been harassing the heroes up there. Phil's done a pass a few times, but he hasn't seen anything. I'll let you know if that changes."

It makes him so angry he can't breathe, the memory of Ranboo's body dropping onto the table in the Syndicate meeting room, Hermes's sword through his chest. He hadn't been conscious then, and it had been dumb luck—Ponk visiting because they were renegotiating his contract, Techno in the room because he'd been checking security for their next scheduled meeting—that had led to his survival. They hadn't known why, at first. It had just been touch and go, frantically getting Ranboo healed and Ponk set up in a guest room to recover, for hours.

Then he'd seen the broadcast, and the Captain's speech about their newest rogue hero. And Technoblade had seen *red*, had come the closest he ever has to breaking his nullifier from sheer force of rage, all the explosive power within him welling up at once.

The Syndicate has already denounced Hermes, with Orpheus standing in front of a held-hostage television host and sweetly informing the world that Hermes might be a murderer, but the Syndicate has *some* standards. It's a useful smokescreen for the real reason they won't take him. They have rules about killing fellow members, regardless of whether or not Hermes could have known.

Poor Lethe. It had been Nemesis who'd suggested it. She'd known Ranboo before he was a hero, before she'd defected, and she'd brought him around a time or two. He was a soft-hearted kid who hated picking sides, and he'd known, even then, that the Federation was built on a foundation of lies. Just because he had no better options didn't mean he was blind, and when they'd offered him a place in their organization, he'd accepted.

He'd been the perfect mole, in part because he'd never been anything but perfectly honest. Ranboo didn't pick sides, he picked people. He always picked people.

And look where that got him.

"There's a, uh, new guy working at Niki's. He doesn't know anything about the Syndicate, obviously, or about the secondary business, but she's got him on mornings. She says it's really helpful, actually, him freein' up her evenings to focus on Nemesis stuff. He's kind of an asshole, but he's good at his job."

Boy, hadn't that been a fight. Techno agrees with Wilbur on principle, because the fewer people near Syndicate business, the better, but it had been a treat watching Niki rip into him at the next meeting. She has a point too, because all the prebaking she does at night is mostly pushed to the side now that she has someone to make the bulk of her food in the morning. Dream *has* been useful.

He's also too pretty for his own good, even if he's apparently unaware of it. Thank god he's in the back in the mornings, because if Techno has to look at those gorgeous green eyes and that too-bright smile every day... A man can only be so strong. And Dream makes him *weak*.

"We've been trying to track down that project you said the Federation was working on. It's been going slow."

That's the thing that frustrates him the most, Techno thinks. That Ranboo had stumbled on something big, had passed on as much information as he could, and he'd been told that they

would handle it. That Techno could investigate for him, and he wouldn't have to put himself at risk. That he could focus on getting his team in order and start helping people.

But here Techno is, over a month after Ranboo's body dropped on a table in front of him, and he has nothing. Every lead he gets seems to lead back to the Tower, but the information from them doesn't add up to anything conclusive. The most he's been able to find is references to the top of the food chain, and something to do with the prison.

Well, they've hated the prison since day one, and that hasn't changed. Schlatt's always been a corrupt fuck and Puffy oblivious to how his vices affect the lower ranks; once, Techno might have thought Hermes was alright, but he knows better now. Everyone on top of the Tower is guilty, to one degree or another, and the attempt on Ranboo's life just proves it.

When he finds Hermes, he's going to snap the little bastard's neck. Watch him teleport away from *that* one.

"I guess that's really all there is to talk to you about," he says, still running his thumbs over Ranboo's fingers. "Do you know where we are in *The Odyssey*? We've just reached the isle of Aea...

A few days later, they get a lead during the early hours of morning, but Erebus is out of commission after a fight with the Angel of Death the previous night. So instead of sending Protesilaus, who has been heading the investigation since Ranboo first brought his concerns forward, they send Nemesis to handle it.

The Tower might be corrupt, but Techno isn't going to risk killing the few good heroes remaining in it. With his luck, they'd send Lethe's former teammates, and that's a tragedy that he can't abide.

When he heads to Niki's bakery, it's with the idea that he'll grab something from the display case and head upstairs to look at some of her notes on recent Las Nevadas activity. That's more of Orpheus's problem to work around, but fresh eyes can help. At the very least, Techno likes to keep an eye on whatever Quackity is up to, now that he's broken off on his own. He doesn't trust the guy.

Nemesis is in the middle of fighting up in second district, so he expects her bakery to be closed. What he doesn't expect is to walk in on a line seven people deep and Dream standing at the register with a look of barely concealed panic on his face.

"I know, I'm sorry," he's saying to an irritated looking woman that keeps glancing at her phone, "I promise I'm trying to get it working, I'm so sorry."

Dream works mornings. If Niki closes without warning, he'll have questions, and Nemesis is bound to end up on the news. What apparently didn't occur to *anyone* is that Dream might not know how to operate a register.

He makes a split second decision, pulling his braid up into a bun and securing it before moving around the line to duck under the counter divide. Dream backs away from the register

like it's going to bite him, and Techno takes over with a small frown, punching in the first woman's order as Dream goes to grab her food. Between the two of them, they manage to burn through the line, and then the rest of the people that flow through Niki's doors over the course of the morning.

In the brief lulls between activity, Techno watches Dream out of the corner of his eye. He's a competent enough baker, clearly knows his way around some of the specialty equipment, and he isn't an idiot. But there are odd gaps in his knowledge that puzzle Techno, like the register, or the way he'd apparently forgotten that the school year ends in a few weeks. It's like he's gone through his whole life without ever needing a job before. The name he gave was obviously fake, neither Techno nor Niki able to find anything under it, and it makes him curious to know what past Dream's hiding from.

Runaway rich kid? Maybe. He's got the face for it, well-fed even if he's a bit too thin for Techno's liking now, and the faint white scar across his cheek is the only one Techno's ever seen. He remembers when it was just a half-healed cut, that first day he'd met Dream, and the fact that it *has* scarred tells him that he'd know if Dream got injured regularly.

Maybe that was the reason he'd been at the bank. Or near it, at any rate.

There's a twinge of guilt in the thought, because if they'd screwed over his ability to access funds before getting cut off, that would explain a lot too. But they'd needed to lure Team Epsilon out of the Tower for Lethe to get a glance at the locking mechanisms for the vault, and it had been the simplest way to do so. Dream is an acceptable casualty in that, especially since he's landed on his feet.

Still. He clears his throat when the last customer finally leaves, close to noon and only an hour or two before Dream's shift is over.

"Niki doesn't usually let you up front," he says when Dream looks over, exhaustion on his face and some of his blond hair escaping from its tie. "Where's she at?"

"Uh, she said it was something important. Something to do with her little brother?" Dream notices the hair and undoes his ponytail, combing his fingers through the strands before tying it back up again. Then he goes to the sink to wash his hands, and Techno snorts.

"Huh. Any idea when she'll get back?" He checks his phone, on the off chance that anyone has texted, but there's nothing. Not in his personal texts, not in the encrypted Syndicate group chat.

"No clue." With a sigh, Dream leans against the counter next to him and squints at the front door. There's shadows under his eyes, and the skin on his hands looks a little raw, like he's been washing his hands too often with harsh chemicals. His sleeves are rolled up, showing off the lean muscle of his forearms, and a ropy red scar on the right one.

Techno blinks, then blinks again. He's wearing his nullifier, and the weight of the emerald dangling from his ear is what encourages him to reach a hand over and brush his fingertips along the line of the scar. "This looks pretty nasty. What happened here?"

For a second, something odd passes over Dream's face, like he's not sure how to answer that question. His mouth pulls to the side as he stares down at the scar, brow furrowing, then he glances up, green eyes skating over Techno's face before focusing on something past his head. "Would you believe a kitchen accident? Those knives get pretty dangerous if you drop 'em."

He doesn't believe it, not even for a second, but Dream's all but begging him to pretend. Same way he'd practically begged Techno to pretend like he *wasn't* homeless—not just pride, but a gut-deep fear that resonates through his whole body like a soldier going on high alert. It's as if losing the illusion means losing something much more dear to him, and Dream will do anything to keep that from happening.

Rich kid. Nasty scar. Currently homeless. Never meeting anyone's eyes.

Whatever the facts add up to, Techno doesn't like it.

"And so you decided to work in a kitchen for a living?" he asks, keeping his voice light and teasing. Well, as light and teasing as he can, which is to say, drawling and sarcastic. "That's, uh, pretty bold right there."

Dream laughs, pushing himself upright and rolling his sleeves back down. It's a shame, because it means Techno loses the view of his wrists, but he understands. He's a lot less understanding when Dream steps away from the counter and goes as if he's going to walk into the back, making a sharp high noise of dismay.

"Don't worry," Dream calls, "I'm just gonna grab the stuff to make us lunch, since Niki isn't back yet."

"Oh, sure, leave the guy with social anxiety on the register alone," Techno yells after him. As if he hadn't chosen to man the register himself, despite not working here. All it had taken was the frantic look in those gorgeous green eyes and he'd been throwing himself in among the wolves.

He makes a face at himself in the reflection of the display case and mouths the word *simp*, then laughs softly when he realizes that it's true. He's so downbad it hurts, and it's never going to go anywhere. Not when Dream is human, and alive, and so fragile that a scratch on his cheek leaves a scar that lingers.

Techno doesn't like to think of what might happen if he dared touch without a nullifier on.

Nightmare doesn't show up to the raid that Nemesis heads, but he's there bright and early when Techno tries to break into the office that holds information about guard rotations for Pandora's Vault. There's a rough plan for breaking out the superpowered prisoners who didn't deserve to be there, but for anything to be set in stone, they need those guard schedules. Which ones can be trusted, which ones can't, that's to be figured out later.

("All of them," Techno says flatly at yet another meeting on the subject. "*No one* deserves to be locked in there.")

“You know I agree with you, mate, but,” and Zephyrus levels him with that look, the look that makes Techno’s lip curl and his fangs bare in a snarl, “we’re going to have to make contingencies for the ones that *shouldn’t* be let free.”

“The contingencies aren’t *leavin’ them locked in prison*, I cannot believe I have to say this.”

“What choice do we have?” Nemesis says the words softly, but everyone falls silent to let her speak. It grates on Techno, that the two former heroes are the ones still pushing for parts of the prison to remain in use, but Orpheus doesn’t look convinced, and if he can just get the new kid to agree—

“Maybe,” Ranboo’s voice wobbles as four sets of eyes turn to him, “maybe we put off the prison break until we have somewhere else? Because, um, we know that they’ll increase security, unless we level the place, so if it’s a choice between leaving people behind in worse conditions...”

He gets his hero designation tomorrow. Techno scowls, reminded that there are *three* heroes in this room, not just two, and tables his plans for now.)

This is something only tangentially related to what Ranboo had alluded to, which is why it’s such a surprise to see Nightmare there at the desk for the Warden’s administrative assistant. He’s got a flashlight jammed up under his chin, precariously wobbling every time he tries to flip through the pages of something, and it looks ridiculous. When the glow of his inner fire bathes the room in pink, the vigilante simply pulls the flashlight out and turns it off before shoving it back in his pocket.

He tries. He really, really tries to be professional, to put on a persona that contradicts his civilian one. But Techno can’t help saying, “*Bruh.*”

“What? You’re making enough light, and it’s more useful.” Nightmare pulls the papers close to his childish mask, then amends his statement, “Okay, not more useful, but definitely more convenient.”

This is the problem that Techno has: Dream might be attractive physically, but Nightmare’s mind reels him in like a hooked fish. He can resist a cute baker, even a cute baker that smiles at him the way Dream does sometimes, but he’s helpless in the face of someone who makes references to Greco-Roman mythos, who cracks jokes about their roles in Homer’s epics, who moves with lithe grace and laughs in the face of certain death.

“You are the worst vigilante I have ever met, Hector,” he says, moving around behind the desk to peer at papers Nightmare is reading. Something to do with President Schlatt, whose constant state of inebriation does little to hide a too-sharp mind.

“I am *not*,” Nightmare shoots back almost instantly, though his muffled voice is a little distracted. “You’re just massively above my paygrade. I can threaten the street-level goons and they’ll clean up their acts, but come on. What am I supposed to do to you?”

“I dunno, hit me with an axe?” The prison guard rotas are written out in timetables underneath Nightmare’s papers. He’d *planned* on activating his nullifier and using his phone

to take pictures of them, but he's sure as hell not going to look like a civilian now.

But.

"Take pictures of the guard schedules," he says, tipping his head to look at Nightmare's mask from the corner of his eye. "We can set up a swap at some point in the future, those schedules for something you need from me."

There's a long pause, and he sees Nightmare's mask turn. It really is an unsettling looking thing, the childishness of the paint contrasted with the obviously dangerous man wearing it. With the hood up too, the only bits of humanity showing are his pale fingers gripping the papers, and Techno wonders if that's intentional.

"Are you not trying to kill me anymore?" Nightmare asks, sounding genuinely curious.

"I didn't say *that*. I'm gonna hunt you down like a rabbit the second we're out of here. But I don't wanna risk breaking something I need in here, and I'd rather you take the pictures and maybe give 'em to me later than not have the pictures at all."

"Oh, well, so long as you'll try and kill me *after*," he scoffs. Nevertheless, the vigilante does pull a phone out of one of his many pockets, flipping the camera app open and activating the flash. When he sets his papers to the side, it's with the obvious intent to take them later, but the only thing he does with the schedules is take photos. "How far out?"

"As far out as they're scheduled," Techno tells him, scanning the office for anything else useful that he can't touch right now. Just being in the room is starting to cause the walls to fade, dust to build on furniture, papers to start yellowing at the edges.

"Don't expect them to remain the same beyond, like, two weeks," Nightmare cautions before locking his phone and pocketing it again. Different pocket this time. Techno wonders how he keeps track of everything.

"Noted." And then, because he's been wondering about it from the moment he walked into the room, he asks, "So what are you doing here? Because we've fought, what, five times now, and this hasn't ever been on your radar."

Nightmare doesn't answer, choosing instead to heft up a messenger bag from next to the desk and stuff his papers in it. Once it's secured and the strap is slung up over his shoulder, he unhooks his axe from his belt instead, and tips his head towards the door. "If you can beat me in a fight, maybe I'll tell you next time we run into each other."

"You're seriously asking for a duel." Techno laughs, a single harsh bark. "You're joking. From *me*? I'm going to crush you like an egg, little man."

"You've got the talk. Now I want to see you walk the walk." The blank, painted on expression of Nightmare's mask stares at him unsettlingly. He's bouncing on his toes slightly, Techno realizes, and it's like—it's like he's genuinely eager to fight, like he has absolutely no idea how hard it is for Techno to avoid brushing against him on accident when they do. Every fight he's in, he has an extra opponent no one else sees: himself.

“Troy falls in the end, Hector. Remember that.” It’s the most warning he will give. The most warning he *can* give. Nevertheless, when he leaves the room, he feels the bright spark of life in Nightmare follow him.

It’s warm at night and getting warmer, the threat of summer creeping ever closer. Third district isn’t dominated by the night life quite the same way that the southern districts are, but the blindingly white pillar of the Tower makes up for it. The spotlights on its bleached walls make it glow, and when Techno turns back to the rooftop door, he sees Nightmare standing there, mask tipped up to stare at it.

It would be cheating to strike at him now. It would also be practical. Techno’s sword is snaking towards Nightmare’s neck before the thought is finished, and he can tell that he catches the vigilante off guard when the axe is almost too slow to deflect the blow. The next one is dodged more deftly, and the one after that sees them fall into a dance that is too natural for how few times they’ve fought.

Nightmare goes on the attack, swinging his axe at Techno’s arms, his legs, his neck, never stopping to guard and trusting in his agility to avoid the return blows. Techno turns the axe away with his guard, knocks a strike to the side and twists his blade to jab at the opening it makes, slices at Nightmare’s throat and his fragile arms because he slips away too quickly when the strike is for his torso. Across the roof, one end to the other, neither quite getting the advantage and neither quite faltering either.

In some ways, fighting Nightmare is easier than fighting heroes and the idiot civilians that sometimes get in his way. Most of the man’s skin is covered, which means an errant brush against Techno’s body won’t kill him right away. In other ways, that makes it harder, because Techno starts slipping into old, bad habits, chasing after him like he’s Erebus. Like he’s Hermes.

One of Nightmare’s exposed fingers nearly brushes the burning bone of his arm, and Techno panics, twisting his body to slam a boot into Nightmare’s gut instead. It throws him off guard, axe clattering to the ground as he struggles to breathe, and Techno takes advantage of his inadvertent opening. His sword tip is at Nightmare’s throat by the time he draws a full breath, and the mask is luminous in the light of the Tower when he finally looks up.

“Well, fuck,” Nightmare says, the edge of a wheeze in his voice. “You beat me.”

“Sure did,” Techno tells him, making no move to slit his throat. Even though this is the sixth time Nightmare’s mucked up one of his investigations, even though the Syndicate agreed that the vigilante needed to be taken out sooner rather than later. He can’t bring himself to push forward, hates the idea of Nightmare’s skin splitting and spilling blood as much as he hates the idea of it turning black and crumbling inward as he withers.

“So... Do you want to know what I’m looking into?” Nightmare’s head tips, curious, unafraid. He’s never, in all the times they’ve clashed, been afraid.

Techno’s heart aches, because he knows he has to kill this man. He knows. Whatever Nightmare is doing, it’s putting their own efforts at risk, and the press haven’t dropped his story yet—his mask is too creepy, his actions too sinister, his intended message too noble for

how offputting he is. They're having a field day with him. He's managed to push Hermes off the front page.

Depending on what Nightmare tells him, he has to kill this man *tonight*, and Techno isn't ready for that when he asks, "What are you looking into?"

"President Schlatt is having people brought to Pandora's Vault for a reason," Nightmare says, and there's a fervency to the words that almost catches Techno off guard. "He's doing something with them, something serious, that no one is willing to admit to. There's something rotten in the Tower, and it goes all the way to the top. I want to find it. I want to expose it, so everyone knows what he's done, and there's nothing that can stop the consequences from coming down on him."

None of this is news. None of this is news, because Ranboo said something similar when he brought his suspicions to the table, when he laid out the nearly invisible threads of something bigger that he couldn't quite grasp. Techno's been chasing the same damn thing since Ranboo slipped into his coma, and it's too good to be true. It's all he can do to keep his voice steady when he asks, "Does this have anything to do with Hermes killing his protégé?"

There's a moment of hesitation, a frisson of tension that locks up Nightmare's shoulders. "Yeah. At least twelve people have died for this, and I'm here to avenge them."

He has to ask. He has to ask before he bloodies his blade and puts the vigilante six feet under. "Why tell me?"

"Because I'm not *your* Nightmare, Protesilaus." The smile on Nightmare's mask never wavers. "I'm *his*."

"So how'd it go?" Phil asks when Techno steps out of the elevator onto the top floor of the building they've claimed for the Syndicate. The lower floors are regular tenement apartments, but the basement leads to their organization headquarters, and this floor is home.

There is no blood on his sword. Techno makes a face and says, "He got away again. Slippery bastard."

Chapter End Notes

Hermes/Nightmare - Dream

The Captain - Puffy

Orpheus - Wilbur

Nemesis - Niki

Protesilaus - Technoblade

Lethe - Ranboo

Erebus - Eret

Angel of Death/Zephyrus - Philza

Techno is over here like "I am crushing hard on two people at once this is unprecedented" and it's going to be hilarious when he realizes that he's just crushing on the same person twice over.

undertaking

Chapter Notes

I've been getting an absolute kick reading some of the speculation in the comments; I know I'm bad at replying, but just know that I read and cherish every single one.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There are blue lines on his map now. Dream circles the Warden's secondary office with blue marker first, then green, and feels a little smug about the fact that no one caught him. (Other than Protesilaus, but he doesn't count.) It's not the only building circled in blue, and Dream's got a pretty good idea of the places the Syndicate considers theirs.

Some of his informants are double dipping, but that's to be expected. Jack Manifold is probably the most reliable of the lot, and he'll sell his information to just about *anyone* for the right price—but it's always good. Despite his best efforts, Dream is growing to rely on the blaze hybrid to confirm information from his other sources, verifying and reverifying whenever something seems off.

It's still like chasing a ghost, like chasing Ranboo's ghost, through the system. A log of visits here. A package there. Schlatt's suspicious interest in one place, and his suspicious lack of interest in another. All of it is circumstantial, none of his evidence enough to even consider bringing to the Captain. Fuck, none of it is enough for him to even consider bringing to his *team*, even knowing that Sapnap and George would believe anything.

He's been operating in the dark for too long. Dream pins and repins the string on his map, sorts through stacks of paper on his floor, writes numbers and ciphers on the sticky notes he uses to organize everything, but eventually it all comes to this: he can't find out anything real without venturing into the Tower archives at City Hall. The ones built into an obsidian room, which he can't teleport in and out of.

They lock the archives at night. He needs to strike during the day. As Nightmare. In the third district, where the Tower is located.

Dream opens a notebook as he starts cooking dinner, and plans.

It's a beautiful day in the third district, and he is a horrible vigilante.

City Hall stands, white but not so absurdly white as the Tower looming only a few blocks over, and people filter in and out of it in ones and twos. It's not actually busy today, which serves his purposes, but then again, it's never really busy. Most people go to Federation offices for grievances and the DMV for anything involving paperwork.

He bounces on his toes, rolling his neck a few times as he considers his options. From his vantage point on an opposite building, he can see the security, what little of it exists, and the windows into the top floors. There are metal detectors down on the first floor with a few cops hanging around, but the real advantage City Hall has is its proximity to the Tower. If he's spotted, he'll have a little less than five minutes before a response team is on the ground.

No shot he walks through the front door and gets what he wants. That leaves the roof and the emergency exits as his ins.

He keeps his hood up over his hair and his hands in his pockets as his thumb flicks over the power nullifier on his little finger. His tail wraps around one of his legs underneath his cargo pants, and Dream lets out a nearly silent sigh of relief over the fact that he'd judged the fit of the waistband right. The less people who can connect Nightmare with Hermes, the better. If he can keep that number at zero, better still.

Then he stretches himself to his limit and teleports across the broad thoroughfare, landing on the curve of the domed roof. He doesn't stumble, but he does turn his landing into a controlled slide, away from prying eyes, that lands him at the rooftop door with a soft crunch of gravel under his shoes. There's a camera pointed at the door but the door itself isn't locked, and from experience, Dream knows the security office is barely manned. He slips inside without trouble and shoves his pale hands back in his pockets as the door swings shut.

The stairwell is dimly lit, all concrete, and windowless. Great place to get murdered, he thinks, taking the stairs two at a time as he descends.

City Hall is about three stories tall, but the Tower archives are on the second sublevel basement. The first one holds the archives for the rest of the city, and has pretty gnarly security anyways, but it's not wrapped in obsidian. The construction on the second sublevel, started sometime twenty years ago, had been controversial; Dream can't remember it, he'd been too young, but he's read the minutes from old meetings and things got *heated*. Zephyrus and the Captain arguing against using city funds for Tower gain, Erebus and Ares arguing that it was a more cost-effective solution for everyone, Sapnap's dad remaining stubbornly neutral the whole time.

Mind numbing stuff to read, but he'd read all of it anyways. Had to, for the position he was stepping into. After Zephyrus defected and Bad went on sabbatical, the founding members had been reduced to three. And then Bad had never returned, Erebus had taken a step back from leading the Tower, and the Captain and Schlatt could never agree on *anything*, so it had been up to him to fill in that gap as the number one hero.

("He's coming back," Sapnap says, stubbornly, knuckles bruised and bleeding. Dream doesn't offer to wrap them, just resets the punching bags and falls into a fighting stance next to him again.

"I know, Sap. Of course he will." But Dream doesn't think that's true, because Skeppy had gone on sabbatical too and now no one could reach either of them. Not even their son, fifteen and angry, fifteen and scared, fifteen and alone but for the two friends he made in hero track training.

“When he gets back, you won’t have to go to all those stupid meetings.” Sapnap’s fists slam into the bags, rapid fire, smoke curling out from under his palms. “And then I’ll be the top-rank hero, and the three of us can just chill.”

“You gotta pass the tryouts first, idiot,” Dream says, but what he means is *I hope they come back too.*)

He opens the door into the first floor hallway and peers out. No one appears to be on this end of City Hall, but the elevators to the archives are—he pauses to orient himself—about four hallways over, at the northwest corner of the building. Time to see how far he can get before someone spots him.

The hallways are silent, sound muffled by the thin carpets and the fabric paneling on the walls. He’s always kind of hated civic buildings for that reason, their endless stretches of fluorescent lighting and spruce doors leading to rooms without nameplates. What the fuck is *behind* those doors? He’s never found out.

There isn’t anyone by the elevators down to the archives either, though Dream passes by the open doors to the tax offices and glances in on habit. Lines stretch out into a different hallway, clerks stamping and muttering at their computers. None of the people in the room look up to see his smiling mask.

Alright. First hurdle of this adventure has been cleared. He calls the elevator and, once it arrives, punches in his old override code and prays. If he’s lucky, no one will have thought to come and reset the codes for the archives. If he’s lucky, the elevator will start moving in a few seconds, taking him down into an obsidian prison that he might not escape from.

He waits, staring at the panel. After what feels like hours but is probably only seconds, the doors slide closed and the elevator groans as it begins to descend.

Dream exhales, leaning back and gripping the handle that runs against the back of the elevator before he remembers the cameras and shoves his hands back in his pockets again. It’ll be fine. He can probably flip his disguise back on, but he doesn’t want to risk even a second of hesitation if he needs to escape. For now, the risk of being discovered is better than the risk of being *caught*.

The elevator passes the first sublevel and begins to slow. He bounces on his toes, rolls his neck again, wishes he dared pull his hands out of his pockets to shake them out. When the doors open, no one is there to greet him; no one is in the archives at all, presumably because he hadn’t made an appointment and the archivist isn’t available without one.

Good. He steps out of the elevator and cranes his neck around, trying to spot some kind of directory. Every time he’s come prior, the archivist has been there to lead him wherever he needs to go. Old founder meeting minutes aren’t going to be in the same place as the prison blueprints, and neither of *those* are going to be in the lists of items stored in various secured warehouses. Dream knows where the minutes are located, and he knows where the hero records are located, but he needs the blueprints and those lists of contraband.

Whatever book Schlatt has, Dream knows he didn't get it somewhere legitimate. So he goes looking for those lists first, checking the signs posted to the sides of shelves and pulling boxes to peer at the folders contained within.

It's slow work. He doesn't actually understand the filing system, and it's not readily apparent based on what he finds. For a second, he gets excited over a series of shelves that corresponds to various criminals and villains that have been stopped and locked up—but no. It's an unofficial registry of powers instead, lists of information about hybrid types, attempts to draw ties between powers and heritage. Not what he's looking for.

(He gets the urge to categorize, because it's hard sometimes, not knowing what your opponents will bring to the table. With hybrids, they can make educated guesses—anyone who sees his tail, Ranboo's height, and their aversion to water could assume they can teleport—but that's all it is: guesses. And with humans like George, they don't even have that much.

Still. It puts a bad taste in his mouth, seeing just how much private information is held in these archives.)

"Come on," he mutters to himself, pulling yet another box of files down to look through it. "Come *on*. I know it's here somewhere."

The longer he's down here, the more likely it is someone catches him. He bares his teeth behind the mask and refuses to check the time on his phone, just sets the box to the side and looks for another one. And another one. And another one.

Nothing.

Shit fuck damn. He stumbles on the section of the archive that holds blueprints for the Tower and the prison, along with files on every hero that's ever been confirmed, all eighty-seven of them. They're down to thirty-nine (*thirty-seven*, part of him whispers, *with Lethe dead and you gone*) now, between deaths and retirements, stretched too thin over a city that doesn't know how to handle itself without their protection anymore.

He doesn't have time to look at his own file, but he does. Legal name redacted, like it is with every hero file, but a photo of himself, a listing of his powers, a notation on the range of his teleports. Out of date, because he's learned to push that range further. And there, at the bottom, a note on Lethe's murder and a stamp, red and vibrant, that says DEFECTED.

"I haven't," he whispers to the picture of a face he doesn't recognize anymore, before freezing when he hears the grind of the elevator across the massive room. It echoes in the silence, and he's suddenly, damningly, out of time.

Blueprints. He can't get any information about the book, if it ever existed down here in the first place, but he *needs* those blueprints. Dream scrambles down the shelves, pulling box after box and checking dates, checking notations—the Tower's gone through dozens of revisions and refurbishments, after villain attacks and breakouts, especially since the more dangerous ones used to be held in the subfloors there too. That was back during the days of rehabilitation, before the focus turned to containing threats.

Dream pauses, finally pulling the first box of prison architectural drafts, and then checks the date on the first draft. Ten years ago, though construction on the prison didn't begin until a year later. He remembers, because Hephaestus had overseen the construction and officially become the Warden the same year the prison was completed and Dream had become Hermes. But ten years ago, the prison didn't exist, and there were five founding members running the Tower, and Schlatt had just retired as a hero and accepted his role as President, two months before the signature on this draft.

He stares at the date, deaf to the sound of boots on the obsidian floor, and thinks about how Zephyrus defected three days later.

"I don't know why they sent *me*," echoes through the room, and suddenly Dream can hear again and he's panicking because he knows that voice. Even with the voice changer, he knows that voice. "Come on, fire powers and a room full of paper?"

The bare space on his wrist where his watch belongs *burns*, because he knows that George is answering Sapnap on a line that he can't hear. Even if he had his earpiece in, he doesn't have access to those channels anymore, can't listen to his best friends chatter as Vulcan paces down the archive stacks in hunt for a newly notorious vigilante.

He needs to move. Dream shoves the box back and pulls the last one in the line, grabbing the blueprints and drafts for a new section of the prison. No time to take pictures and photocopy them, so he steals the originals instead, shoving them in his bag before pushing the box back. If he's lucky, they won't know what he grabbed, but he doesn't feel lucky.

Obsidian crunches under Vulcan's boots as he draws closer and closer. Dream recalls where the cameras were, orients himself with the shelves, and teleports to the opposite side of the room. Then he runs, sprinting for the elevator and slamming his fingers into the call button as quietly as he can.

"Oh *Nightmare*," he hears, Vulcan's voice bouncing off the black walls and floor, the dim lighting doing little to alleviate the darkness of the obsidian ceiling, "come out, come out, wherever you are."

It's me, Dream wants to yell back. It's me, it's your friend, your team leader, I never killed Ranboo, you know I wouldn't, it's me and I need help and I need you by my side and it's *me*. But he doesn't dare, because the mask muffles his voice only enough to fool people who don't know him. Sapnap's heard his voice in one way or another for almost twelve years.

He stays mute as the elevator doors open, and hates himself for it.

As the elevator rises, he secures his bag more tightly to his back, pulling the strap until everything sits snug across his chest. Then he unhooks his axe from his waist, bouncing it in his hand before settling, legs slightly spread, into a battle ready stance.

If he were still leading the team, he would have sent himself downstairs, leaving Vulcan on the roof and Somnus waiting by the elevator. In his absence, Vulcan is in the obsidian box—but he launches out of the elevator with a swing of his axe, because Somnus is *still* waiting by the elevator, camera feeds open on a tablet in one hand and his other half-lifted.

“Go to sleep,” Somnus says, ducking away from the axe as his power rushes out into the space around them. Dream lets himself stumble, as if it were working, then uses that stumble to push past him into the empty hallway. “Get up here, idiot, I caught our vigilante.”

He doesn't hear Vulcan's response, dropping to his hands and swinging that motion into a kick aimed at Somnus's chin. They're too well trained, all of them, and the kick doesn't land, but it makes Somnus back off. Just enough.

Dream grabs his axe and starts running.

“Vulcan! He's not asleep!” The soft walls and floors muffle the sound of footsteps behind him, but he can track how close Somnus is by the way he yells, “Of *course* I put him to sleep, you idiot! It didn't take!”

Clear comms, Dream wants to shout back at him, but he doesn't. He hits the door to the stairs at a dead run, using the rails to swing himself up to a higher landing without taking a single step. Somnus is right at his heels, daggers drawn, his blue cape and white goggles making Dream nostalgic for the last time they'd sparred. He can't risk getting drawn into a fight, even if Somnus's power won't work, and he slams into the rooftop door almost as quickly, using his axe to counterbalance when the gravel wants to slip under his feet again.

Fire lances across the roof in front of him and he swears, changing direction at the last second. Vulcan hovers at the edge of the roof, boots and gloves wreathed in flames, and he looks *pissed*. “Nightmare! Just give up!”

His armor as a hero had been designed to withstand Vulcan's flames, since his skin wouldn't feel the burn—that has always been the trick, with his immunity to other powers. Flames manifested won't burn, water called to Nemesis's fingers isn't felt on his skin, Protesilaus's withering effects can't touch him, but his skin and his clothing are two different things. The hems on his hoodie are already becoming thready from the number of duels he's fought against the wither hybrid. And fabric *burns*.

The next burst of flames cuts him off from Somnus, circling around him until he can only see Vulcan and a pale blue crescent of sky. Dream's pants are smoking, singed at the leg, and his mask is uncomfortably dry against his skin, heat flickering at his cheek like the paper wants to catch alight.

“Turn yourself in and maybe you won't burn alive!” Vulcan laughs, his manic cackle so familiar that Dream has to swallow down the tightness that makes his throat want to close. “Hands in the air, asshole!”

He wants to do exactly that, rip his mask off and beg them to believe him, but it won't work. Because even if they do, Schlatt needs only one touch to turn them against him. The only way to keep them safe, the only way to keep his friends from being used against him, is to keep them at arm's length.

“Not happening,” he says, so low that neither of them can hear him. He drops low, hooks his axe back onto his belt, and takes a deep breath as smoke begins to fill the air.

Then he runs, sprinting straight for Vulcan and the only exit out of the flame. The hero calls a wall of them up, but Dream teleports just past it before the fire can reach him, launching himself into the air with a whirling kick aimed right at Vulcan's head. Somnus has always been good at dodging; Vulcan takes the hit full on to his cheek, falling to the rooftop with a shout as Dream lets his momentum take him over the edge, off the side.

He teleports the next rooftop over before he can fall too far, rolling until he's on his feet again, and starts to run. The less he uses his power, the better; he doesn't want anyone asking questions. He can hear shouts from behind him, his old team giving chase a little too late, and for a second, he thinks he might get off almost scot free.

A crack rings out. Pain flares along his left leg, bright and all consuming, and he stumbles before lunging forward again, ignoring the way his muscles scream and blood starts soaking through the fabric of his pants.

There's no way he can run all the way home, not without getting caught. Dream changes plans, throws himself off the edge of the roof as a truck passes by, and prays that he's judged the speed right as he teleports one last time.

He stitches his cargo pants up with neat, small stitches in black cotton, his phone propped up against the wall as the news plays in front of him. The blueprints sit in a stack under the map, a pink sticky note on top, red thread tying the folder shut. His own thigh is stitched up too, with clear plastic thread that won't foster bacteria, leg outstretched and antibiotic smeared over the bullet wound.

It's damned lucky that the shot glanced off his leg rather than landing. If he hadn't jumped off the roof, he knows the next one would have hit dead on; Sapnap hates losing, and he's got the highest body count on the team.

Dream's been thinking a lot, about being a hero. About what it means. About what the Federation told them it meant.

When he'd trained Team Sigma, before they *were* Team Sigma, back when it was just Ranboo and Tommy and their best friend in the world, he'd told them that sometimes, you make hard choices. That sometimes a dead villain is the price you have to pay for a safer city, that sometimes the math doesn't work out and you can't save everyone, that sometimes you have to live with being a murderer and trust the Tower's legal team to keep it off your record.

("That's some *horseshit*," Tommy says, at fourteen, so arrogant that it's like seeing a tiny blond Sapnap with wings. "What's the point in being a hero if we're killing people?")

"We shouldn't be," Dream tells him, tells them, because Ranboo and Tubbo are listening too. He's had this discussion with Ranboo before, during long nights on the roof of the Tower, so high up that they can almost touch the clouds and the pain hiding within them.

"Well then why the fuck—"

“We shouldn’t be,” Dream repeats himself, interrupting him. “But sometimes, we do. I just want you to be prepared for that possibility, because when it happens, you *can’t* break, Tommy. You’re going to be Icarus, flying too high, and I need to know that it won’t break you.”

That makes him pause. “They already picked out a hero name for me?”

“Vulcan and the Warden floated one, but it’s not official until it’s official.” Dream smiles at him, but it’s a small, sad smile. It makes Tommy’s blue eyes harden, makes his feathers stiffen and flare before settling again.

“Then we’re just going to be the first heroes that *don’t*,” Tommy says, Icarus says, with nothing but faith in his voice. “We’re going to be better than that. We don’t *need* to kill.”

And Dream believes him, because if anyone can manage it, it’s these kids.)

The news plays footage of Vulcan’s flames engulfing the roof of City Hall, of a figure in black and green leaping from rooftop to rooftop. Nightmare had finally started to fall out of the news cycle, but this stunt throws him right back into the thick of it. He squints down at his phone, trying to see if his hands are unnaturally white, if the alabaster skin under his mask shows too much.

He’s pretty lucky that the bullet winged the leg his tail *wasn’t* wrapped around too. Dream doesn’t want to think about what copper-jacketed lead might do to the fragile vertebrae in his tail, or what kind of nerve damage that would leave in the rest of his spine. He’s broken his tail a few times, and the sensation always left him sick for weeks afterwards.

Is that what it is to be a hero? Curling up on a bed after puking his brains out from the pain, knowing that he’ll get up and go out and pretend like his balance isn’t shot? Is it cutting someone down with a sword, knowing he could have struck to maim instead of to kill, but being too furious to pull the blow? Pressing his hands into the hole in George’s body, putting as much possible pressure on the wound and knowing it might not be enough?

How much has he done to help people in the end, really?

He knows that he’s lucky to have been picked up when he was. The clock had been ticking, every second he was out on the streets, from the moment he ran from... somewhere. He can never remember that, where he came from, who taught him the things he needed to survive; he only ever remembers those years on the streets, and then the Captain’s gentle hands and her mass of white hair, the smile on her face as she bent over a lost child and offered him a home.

He’s lucky, because they had a hero name picked out for him almost as soon as he entered the training track. He’s been Hermes longer than he’s been Dream, it feels like sometimes, and he wouldn’t be *anyone* if it wasn’t for the Federation. The friends he has (had), the life he has (had), the opportunities he has (had)—all of it comes back to the Tower, and the hero who stopped long enough on her patrol to bring him back to it.

But now Dream wonders if he's really been paying that forward, the way he's always thought, or if he's just been soothing his own ego. When he arrested all the people he's arrested, when he drove his sword through a rampaging piglin hybrid's heart, when he did everything that he was told to do by the President and the Captain and the Warden, had it helped? Had he been helping people?

Has he ever helped anyone?

Dream doesn't know anymore. He stops taking the disguise off, the heist at City Hall an exception; these days, the human face that looks back at him in the mirror feels more real than the one that actually belongs to him. That face, the face that gets played on new specials occasionally now, the face that exists on wanted posters in police stations, that's Schlatt's face. Hermes, in his stupid domino mask that hides nothing, belongs to Schlatt.

Show everyone the pretty white ender hybrid, a one in a million chance. Make him do a little dance on stage as he climbs to the top of the ranks. Pat him on the head and tell him he's good as he puts one, ten, fifty, a hundred people in prison, for whatever fucked up experiment you want to run. The longer Dream looks at his career, the more he sees Schlatt's crushing grip on his life.

Maybe he doesn't have to be Hermes to do something to pay his good fortune forward. Maybe it's enough, just helping this way, as the Nightmare the city can't get rid of. Maybe, when all this is said and done, he'll let Hermes die and stay as Dream forever. Just Dream.

(He's beginning to think that he won't live much longer, once this is done, but he hopes to be proven wrong.)

Knowing it's a mistake, knowing that he really can't be running around on an injured leg the night after he got shot, Dream pulls on his second mask (one burned, nine to go) and climbs out the window to go hunting anyways. The nights are getting shorter and shorter, and he needs to get to the bottom of this sooner rather than later.

A trip to the Pub, a stop in by Church Prime, a visit to the five or six dead drops he's got set up for his informants. He stops a robbery, mostly by grabbing the robbers in question and chucking them out of the store before returning the stolen money. They run, when it looks like he might chase them. It makes him feel a little better.

He finds himself on top of a Syndicate-owned pharmacy before long, axe in hand and mask turned towards the bright column of the Tower in the distance. He knows this place is Syndicate because he's seen Orpheus and Nemesis here a few times, picking up medicine or getting patched up by the one-armed doctor that runs it.

Dream has a theory that goes something like this: Zephyrus left the Federation for a reason. Protesilaus is looking into Pandora's Vault for a reason. For now, the Syndicate's goals might align with his own, and Nightmare can put his enmity for the villains aside long enough to get something done.

When he brings Schlatt down and clears his name, things will be different. But until then, he needs allies, and the Syndicate aren't the worst ones to trust.

The crunch of gravel under heeled boots is as familiar as Protesilaus's voice drawling, "You got a weird obsession with the Tower, Hector."

"Maybe." Dream doesn't say anything more than that before he turns, his grip on the axe handle tightening. "I have a proposition for you, Protesilaus. Care to duel me and find out what it is?"

"You—you can literally just ask me. You don't have to stage a fight every time." But the wither hybrid draws his sword anyways, falling into a guard position. His mask gives away nothing, and Dream itches to drag a real emotion out of him someday.

"It's more fun this way, don't you think?" Behind his mask, Dream grins, the burning pain in his leg negligible compared to the fire in his heart.

He feels alive when he fights Protesilaus, and some nights, it's the only thing keeping him going.

His axe hooks into the sword, twists to try and yank it away, but Protesilaus is too swift to untangle their blades before falling back again. Dream swings at him, trying to keep most of his weight on his good leg, again and again and again, chasing the wither hybrid across the roof. The clash of netherite against good steel and the crunch of gravel under their feet is like music, set against the sound of cars rushing, sirens wailing in the distance.

He laughs, breathless and not quite wheezing, when he nearly lands a hit and Protesilaus has to scramble back. He's still laughing when the sword just barely misses his ribs, snaking forward in a jab meant for his heart.

"You're a weird one, Hector," Protesilaus says, his voice low and unbothered. It's a far cry from the man who'd been flustered and awkward at their first meeting, but Dream likes that too. It feels easy, fighting him. Nostalgic. The one bit of his time as Hermes that he'll let himself keep.

"Remember when I told you that Schlatt had something going on at the prison?" He swings at Protesilaus's knees, then spins up for a swing at his neck right after, letting momentum twirl him like a diva at homecoming. "I have blueprints for it."

"That why every news station in Esempe is playing footage of you at City Hall?" Protesilaus ducks under the swing and slices at Dream's chest, his forearms, his neck.

He weaves back, shifts forward again, chops at Protesilaus like he's a tree. "I need something, and I couldn't find it at the archives. I need a list of everything that's been taken from prisoners at Pandora's Vault, every item that's ever been confiscated."

"And what, you want me to get that for you?" Protesilaus hooks his sword against the curve of Dream's axe blade, yanking him around and extricating himself as he sends Dream skidding across the gravel.

Ow. His leg doesn't like that much, but he scrambles back to his feet in an instant, lunging forward with a swing. "You've got connections that I don't. You can find it easier than I can. So if you just—"

One of his strikes goes awry, Protesilaus knocking the axe away with ease. It sends Dream's arm swinging back and he puts all of his weight on his bad leg, feeling the muscles give way a second later. Without thinking, he grabs the first thing he can think of to keep from falling again, letting the axe drop out of his other hand.

The soulfire is still warm as it licks over his exposed fingers, his gloved palms, and he holds Protesilaus's arm like a lifeline.

A second later, he's on the ground, breath wheezing out as his back hits the roof. Protesilaus is backing away from him with horror, misery writ into his mouth even though Dream can't see his eyes through the mask. He tries to stand again and the leg gives out, dropping him to hands and knees, and when he looks up, the wither hybrid is gone.

That makes two times now that Protesilaus has run from him for reasons Dream can't explain.

He nearly falls three times in the shower as he gets ready for work, and Dream decides that's his sign that Nightmare needs to be shelved. Not forever, but until his leg will hold his weight without being babied. He can take a week off, at least.

Maybe that will give Protesilaus time to look into that for him.

Chapter End Notes

Hephaestus/The Warden - Sam
The Captain - Puffy
Zephyrus - Philza
Ares - Schlatt
Erebus - Eret
Vulcan - Sapnap
Somnus - George
Hermes/Nightmare - Dream
Protesilaus - Techno

Boy, Dream leaving off the vigilante work right after grabbing Techno's arm definitely won't have any consequences whatsoever. No one is going to draw any conclusions from that. Not a one.

If you want an idea of what Protesilaus and Nightmare (out of his human disguise) look like, have some art.

misery

Chapter Notes

In which Techno is Misery and Dream is CPR, probably.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The clouds sit heavy and dark in the sky, rolling off the lake and over the city. Rain hasn't started yet, but it's only a matter of time. It's fitting, in a way. Techno is mourning, and it feels like the world is mourning with him.

"That's not how the story goes," he whispers to his hands, soulfire banked until his fingers are just black, heavy bones, barely any flicker around them. "It was supposed to be me, Hector, not you."

There's no response. Of course there isn't; Nightmare is withering away somewhere in fifth district, his body rotting and turning to ash as Techno sits here and mopes. He didn't even have the courage to make it a swift death, too caught up in the horror of having Nightmare's exposed fingers on his bare arm to think of it.

He could make his way back there, end it if Nightmare is still alive, but Techno is a coward. He doesn't want to see the husk left behind by his withering. He doesn't want to pull the mask off and see a cavernous skull looking back at him.

"It was supposed to be me," he whispers again, squeezing his eyes shut and feeling the burning tears that won't fall. This body of his is the worst enemy he's ever had, his skin reforming and decaying in waves across his chest and shoulders, the horror mostly hidden by clothes that will degrade to the point of uselessness within a day or two. There are only two constants in Techno's appearance: for now, his face remains human, and for now, his hands are always skeletal and bathed in soulfire.

He wasn't always this way, but turning thirteen had brought with it the slow decay of everything around him. Once, the only sign of his wither heritage had been his eyes, brilliantly white and glowing. Like Erebus, who Techno had looked up to. But Techno wasn't built to be a hero, not when the barest brush of living flesh against his own brought death.

Not when he sits on the edge of the roof, legs dangling in the air, and can feel the hundreds of souls in the buildings below him, itching to be consumed in pain and death.

"Wilbur said you were up here," his father says, breaking the silent heavy air. Techno opens his eyes and looks up, swallowing tightly at the gentle, sympathetic look in Phil's blue eyes. His wings are out, black and foreboding against the storm clouds filling the skies above him, but Techno is pathetically grateful for the sight.

“Can I—” The words stick in his throat. Phil understands him anyways, slowly sitting down despite the fact that he’s still in pajamas. One of his massive wings curls around them both, and his arm drapes over Techno’s shoulders before pulling him in close.

Under his hands, Phil’s skin cracks, heals, cracks again, the withering effect fighting against Phil’s immortality. Techno wraps his arms around Phil’s waist, buries his face in one silk-covered shoulder, and lets the tears flow freely where no one can see them. Phil’s beard is surprisingly soft against his brow as his father turns his head to press a kiss there, and the hand on his own shoulders tightens, fingers digging into the skin that turns to bone without warning.

“What happened?” Phil asks eventually, when Techno stops shuddering against him and the occasional fat drop of rain lands on them instead.

“There was a guy,” Techno tells him, still tucked under the safety of Phil’s wing. It’s easier to confess his sins like this, where no one can see his face. “Uh, do you remember how we’ve been struggling to deal with Nightmare?”

“Mhm,” Phil hums, sounding not fooled in the slightest. Maybe he never had been.

“I tried, Phil. I did my best to never touch him, even though he was *baiting* me sometimes, it was like he *wanted* to die, but I wasn’t—I didn’t want to kill him. I know we agreed it had to be done, but I didn’t want to kill *him*.”

He doesn’t even know what he’s pleading for, anymore. Forgiveness for his lapse in judgment? Nightmare’s death would have been so much easier if he hadn’t let things go on this long, if he’d just done his job the first time. And it would have been a kinder death then, not the agonizing pain of withering away, muscles and heart failing at the very end.

The vision of Nightmare trying to stand and falling again, his body already too weak to hold him upright, haunts him.

“I didn’t want to kill him, Phil,” he says, and Phil does him the kindness of not asking what happened again. He just keeps his arm around Techno’s shoulders and holds him as more and more droplets begin to fall, the skies crying openly where Techno can’t.

“Hey Ranboo,” he says, not touching this time. “Some stuff happened. It’s not happy stuff, but I think you should hear the sad things too.”

Moping won’t do him any good, and he’s got a lead from Nightmare (his last lead from Nightmare) to follow up on. The storms are coming and going, rain alternating between pounding down hard and barely sprinkling, which makes this ideal weather for Nemesis to work in. He meets Niki downstairs, in the office he’s been using to collect his thoughts, and tells her everything he knows.

“That might be something I can find at the Tower,” she says, her masquerade mask resting on her nose, costume flowing around her like the waves off the lake. “I can still get into the

administrative levels, I think.”

“Should we check the police offices first? I think they handle most of that.” He doesn’t even know what Nightmare was looking for. The realization makes him stop, staring off into the distance with a mingled sense of fury and regret. It’s only when Niki clears her throat softly that he looks over to her.

“The Tower is going to be pretty well guarded. If I can find it somewhere else first, it’s worth looking there.” She watches him for a moment before offering him a small smile. “Can you keep an eye on the shop for me? I already texted Dream to tell him he’d be opening alone.”

It’s better than sitting in his room, or Ranboo’s room, wallowing in misery. Techno inclines his head in a nod, then reaches up to activate his nullifier before heading for the elevator up. He can get dressed in something more appropriate for the bakery, and maybe flirt with the only attractive man he *hasn’t* killed yet.

The rain is light enough that the umbrella feels like overkill, but Techno carries one to the bakery anyways. Dream looks almost as miserable as he feels, working the register with slightly more skill than last time. Techno takes over for him as soon as he can, apron tied around his waist and glasses shoved higher on his nose, and gets through the line much more easily.

When the expected lull comes, Dream leans against the counter next to him again, favoring one leg. Not the same leg as last time, Techno notes with narrowed eyes. The rain is picking up, discouraging foot traffic, and Niki doesn’t have any major cake orders that he needs to keep an eye out for. There aren’t any customers in the store that will cause a fuss.

“Sit down,” he says, frowning when Dream jerks his head up in surprise. “You’re trying not to put any weight on that leg, so just sit down. No point in you collapsing in the back.”

“Oh, uh...” Dream trails off, looking embarrassed. “Is it that obvious?”

“I’m surprised you haven’t fallen over yet,” Techno tells him frankly, before rolling his eyes and lifting the counter divide. Dream makes a noise of protest as he carries one of the wrought iron chairs back, but he still sits once Techno puts it down in front of him.

“Thanks. Sorry. You know how it is.” With one of those lopsided, nervous smiles, Dream sits. The instant relief is obvious, face subtly relaxing out of the pinched expression of pain he’s been carrying around.

It’s not the first odd injury that Dream’s shown up with, though most of the time Techno isn’t sticking around long enough to see the effects. Bruises on his jaw, a wrapped finger once, a burn on his cheek that Dream seemed unaware of. There are permanent dark circles under Dream’s eyes and Techno’s not sure he’s ever gotten a full night’s sleep, even beyond the injuries. He doesn’t know where Dream is staying at night, and Niki doesn’t either; the few times they had set one of the Syndicate to follow him, it became apparent that he stays in the alleys and parking garages of the sixth district.

“You’re off in an hour, right?” Techno asks, instead of demanding to know how he’d been injured. From experience, he knows Dream won’t tell him.

“Yeah.” Dream props one elbow on the counter, drops his chin in his palm and watches the rain with a furrow between his eyes. “Niki said she wasn’t coming in today, but I don’t know if that means you’re stuck here for the afternoon. You don’t actually work for her, right?”

“Just a friend helping out. If she’s not back before you go, I’ll just close up shop. No one’s buyin’ pastries in weather like this.” The rain is coming down harder and harder, windows rattling as gusts shake the glass. It keeps up like this for much longer and they’ll be announcing floods.

Dream looks worried. More worried at that, though he’s trying to hide it too.

“Catch the game last night?” Dream asks eventually, when the silence grows suffocating, and Techno barks out a laugh before asking him about a show Wilbur likes instead. They keep the conversation light, tossing topics back and forth as the clock ticks onward and no one else comes in the shop. He doesn’t let Dream get up out of the chair either, and when two rolls around, Techno starts packing up the food in the case.

“I’ll call a friend with a car to come get this,” he explains to Dream’s questioning look, “Niki’s got a deal set up with one of the local shelters. They can take it over for us.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t just—” The buzz of a phone on vibrate cuts Dream off, and he pulls his phone out of his pocket with a frown. “It’s Niki.”

Techno goes back to setting pastries in containers, combining things in larger boxes wherever he can. The one-sided conversation from Dream is interesting to hear, because it sounds like the southern districts are under flash flood warnings. He wonders how Nemesis is handling the sudden advantage; if she feels comfortable enough calling Dream in costume, it means that she’s not at risk right now.

When Dream finally hangs up a few minutes later, he shakes his head and says, “Well, that’ll teach me to argue with you. Niki said to pack up things for the shelter, she’ll run it over later when she gets back, and then lock up for the night. We’re under flood warnings right now.”

“Cool. I’m right about everything always.” Techno gives him a superior grin, placing the last of the muffins in a marked box, then sets the boxes in stacks by the front door. When he turns back towards Dream, the other man is staring out the window again, lower lip caught between his teeth.

He looks more than worried now. He looks sick with fear.

Techno looks outside too, gauging the weather. It’s pretty bad, the storm clouds leaving everything dark as night, rain coming down hard enough to sound like machine gun fire. He can already see water rushing down the street, high enough that it sloshes up onto the sidewalk at points, and it’s only going to get worse. Not a day to be out and about.

It's a nasty storm, but not the nastiest Esempi has seen, and he can't figure out why Dream looks so afraid until he glances back and remembers that this sweater is the one he saw the price tag on. That Dream doesn't have a home to return to, no place to shelter from the weather that isn't the bakery. And Niki told them to close and lock up, which means he won't feel comfortable staying against her orders.

His inner Wilbur voice tells him not to do it, that it's a senseless risk, but Techno finds himself saying, "Hey. I know you got a house and all, but I'm willin' to bet mine is closer. You want to come stay with me until the storm isn't so bad?"

Dream's eyes snap to his, meeting his steady gaze for just a second before they slip away again. It's still the longest he thinks Dream has ever made voluntary eye contact for. "You don't—You don't mind? I mean, it's just rain, but..."

But it isn't just rain, not to Dream, and Techno's shaking his head before he can finish that sentence. "No trouble at all. C'mon, Niki will have my head if she finds out I let you head off in this. You're doing me a favor here."

"Well, I mean, having *the* Technoblade owing me a favor..." Dream gives him a wobbling smile, nervous and hopeful both as he finishes locking up the register and checking the back. It doesn't take more than a minute before he's standing at the door, no jacket, peering outside with trepidation. "Man, that's bad."

"Yeah, but the umbrella will help a bit. Ready to start running as soon as the door's locked?" He unfolds the umbrella, windows rattling again as a particularly hard gust of wind sends rain sheeting against the side of the building.

Dream checks to make sure his wallet and phone are in his pockets, then pulls the keys to the bakery out of his back pocket. He doesn't have any other keys on the ring, and Techno feels more certain than ever that this is the right thing to do. "Ready."

"Here we go." He yanks the door open, turning his umbrella into the wind so it isn't immediately snapped out of his hands. Keeping his body between the worst of the rain and Dream, he watches as the other man slams the door shut and fumbles with the lock, hissing under his breath as the rain soaks them both anyways.

"Go, go, go, go," Dream chants as soon as the door is locked, shoving his key back into his pocket and pressing as close to Techno's side as he can. He's trembling when Techno grabs his arm, and he doesn't protest when they start running.

It's a five minute walk to Niki's bakery from the apartment building the Syndicate has taken over. The two of them make it in three, stumbling and staggering through the rain as water sloshes over their feet. The umbrella isn't *as* useless as it could be, but it's only barely stopping some of the rain from plastering Dream's hair to his skull; it's worse than useless at keeping Techno dry, because he can't angle it to protect both of them.

Dream nearly slips and falls on his face when they get into the front lobby of the apartment building, only staying upright by virtue of Techno's hand on his arm. The rain had been cold enough, but now that they're inside with air conditioning, it's quickly becoming freezing.

Being a nether hybrid keeps him from feeling the cold too badly, but Dream is human, and Dream is shaking like he's fit to fly apart.

"C'mon, we'll get you some dry clothes upstairs," he says, dragging Dream into the elevator and punching his code for the top floor. Dream, thankfully, isn't watching. He's too busy wringing out his hair and holding his soaking sweater away from his skin.

He catches a glimpse of Wilbur through his rain-spattered glasses, the droplets distorting his brother's outraged expression into something comical, but he doesn't linger in the foyer that the elevator opens into. With Dream still at his side, he all but sprints to his bedroom, slamming the door behind them before grabbing the first warm thing he can find out of his closet.

"Here," Techno says, shoving the oversized sweater—probably one of Wilbur's, in retrospect—and pajama pants into Dream's arms. "Bathroom's through there, get changed before you catch something."

"Thanks," Dream says, and Techno isn't imagining the naked relief on his face. He also doesn't hesitate to rush into the bathroom, the slap of wet clothes on tile sounding a second later.

He takes a bit longer to find clothes for himself, grimacing as his braid hangs heavy and wet down his back. There's a good reason why so many of Wilbur's sweaters have made their way into his wardrobe, and he's sure to dig it out of his brother later, but for now, he tugs a soft yellow one with carrot decals on over his head, then pulls on a new set of boxers and jeans.

Should he have offered Dream underwear? His mind goes blank as heat rushes to his face, and Techno carefully does not think about Dream's underwear, or potential lack thereof, again.

It sounds like Dream's going to be in the bathroom for a bit longer, so Techno heads to the kitchen to heat up water for tea. Wilbur is waiting for him there, a malicious gleam in his eyes, and he just sighs. No way to get away from it, even if he'll get a much shorter lecture for now. Wilbur won't spill family business in front of a stranger.

"It's one thing for him to be working at the bakery," Wilbur says, using his height to his advantage to loom. Techno hates it when he does that, forcing him to tip his head back and look up. "It's another thing entirely for him to be in our *house*, Techno."

"You didn't see him standin' there," Techno mutters, dodging around him to turn the kettle on. "Wilbur, he doesn't have anywhere else to go in this storm. It's just until the rain stops."

"*It's just until the rain stops*," Wilbur repeats mockingly, "do you hear yourself right now? Honestly, Technoblade, I'd have thought you were the *one person* who understood the need for secrecy. A little privacy. A place to just be *us*."

His temper flares. "Considerin' that the only place for me to be *just us* is an obsidian box with no exits, no, Wilbur, I can't say our home has ever struck me like that."

There's a long, dangerous pause. Wilbur's eyes narrow behind his round glasses, and Techno meets his gaze full on, his own glasses still stained with rainwater. The emerald dangling from his ear feels heavier by the second, and the emerald stud in Wilbur's ear gleams, like it's taking effort to keep him human.

"And when this comes back to bite you?" Wilbur asks, voice soft. Threateningly soft.

"It won't." Techno doesn't allow his own voice to waver, not even for a second. "And if it does, I'll deal with it."

After a few more seconds of charged silence, Wilbur leans back, falling into the comfortable slouch he usually has. The look in his eyes says this discussion isn't over, but he won't say anything more when they're both incredibly aware of the stranger currently in Techno's bathroom. His bedroom now, and coming into the hall, though it's harder to feel the souls around him when his powers are suppressed.

"Well, if you're sure," Wilbur says as Dream sticks his head around the corner into the kitchen. His blonde hair hangs in curtains around his face, only a little bit damp now, and his skin is a little pink where it isn't covered by Wilbur's oversized sweater and Techno's too-large pajama pants.

"Um," Dream says, glancing between them warily, "I'm not interrupting something, am I?"

"Not at *all*." Wilbur turns his brilliantly false smile on Dream, clapping his hands together. "I'm sure my brother has considered every possible ramification of his actions, and won't regret any of them. Lovely to meet you, by the way."

"...Right. We've met before, actually." Dream dodges around Wilbur's outstretched hand, taking stand behind Techno instead. It shouldn't make him feel as pleased and possessive as it does, but Techno can't help the dark curl of both emotions when Dream sees him as a protector.

"Wilbur's my brother," Techno tells him, shoving his hands in his pockets so he isn't tempted to reach out and lay a possessive hand on Dream's shoulder. It's too risky, when he's already pushing against his nullifier. "He's also leaving now."

"And if I told you to make me?" Wilbur asks, dark eyes flicking to Dream for just a moment. "Fine, fine, I'm going. If you need me, I'll be in the rec room."

Techno grunts, watching as Wilbur sketches a half bow to them both before walking away. His fingers are still itching to reach out and touch Dream, so he shoves them deeper in his pockets as he turns to the kettle and watches the other man out of the corner of his eye. Dream tucks his hair behind his ear, the pink flush on his freckled skin not vanishing now that Wilbur's no longer in the room.

Actually—the longer Techno looks, the more Dream's skin looks rubbed *raw*, not just flushing from embarrassment. He frowns and turns, grabbing Dream's jaw without thinking so he can pull the blond's face further into the light.

“Techno?” Dream’s voice cracks, his brilliant green eyes going wide as a *real* blush chases across his cheeks. But that just makes the rawness of the skin there more obvious, like the upper layer has been scoured off. Or maybe like he’s taken a hot shower for too long, despite the fact that Techno didn’t hear the shower turn on.

“Your face,” he mutters, realizing now that he’s in Dream’s space, hovering over him with that same possessive air, their faces barely inches apart. It’s a lot more compromising than he intended. “Uh, I mean, your skin looks like—do you need lotion or something?”

“Uh, I, uh,” Dream stutters, gaze flicking to Techno’s ear, his lips, his brow, his lips again. “I—I mean, if you want, and you have some, I wouldn’t—I wouldn’t say *no* to some lotion or —”

“Yeah, okay, I can, uh.” Techno lets him go, scrambling backwards and trying to banish the warmth from his palms. Dream’s skin, even sensitive and stripped of its oils, is terribly soft. He wants to run his knuckles down the curve of Dream’s cheek, wants to follow that path with his lips, wants—

(Nightmare falls to the ground at his feet and tries to stand. Fails. He runs before he can see him fail to stand a second time.)

“I’ll get you that lotion,” he says, ice trickling down his spine as he turns and heads for the small bathroom near the elevator. They use it exclusively for storing their first aid supplies, and he’s bound to have something decent in there.

He needs to get a hold of himself. Dream is human and fragile, and Techno’s already killed one man by accident. Letting his guard down around Nightmare had led to nothing but pain, and letting his guard down around Dream will be more of the same. Even if he keeps the nullifier on, even if his wither heritage is tucked away somewhere secret and safe, he doesn’t trust himself; the nullifier makes it *harder* to access his powers, not impossible.

If he strains himself, he can feel the flicker of Dream’s soul in the kitchen, Wilbur down the hall, the people in the apartments below them. And if he pushes himself just a little bit further, he can feel his powers welling to the fore, ready to spill out from his fingertips and leave destruction in their wake.

The idea of Dream’s handsome features rotting from the inside, veins going black and eyes going hollow as everything withers, makes him sick. He can’t let that happen. He *won’t* let that happen.

Even if the sight of Dream in his kitchen, wearing his clothes, makes every part of him cry out to keep him.

“Here,” Techno says, returning with a bottle of lotion meant for sunburns and dry skin. Dream has a cup of tea, the box on the counter open and the teabag sitting in the mug. “Do you want some help getting it on your face, or...”

“Yeah, actually,” Dream admits, holding the mug close to his chest. “Is there someplace we can sit down?”

“That depends on whether or not you want Wilbur to walk in on this.” He sees the look on Dream’s face and grins, unable to help it. “C’mon, you can bring that cup of tea to my room. He won’t bother coming back there.”

It’s odd, because he can feel Dream limping along behind him, but he can’t hear him. The man moves as silently as Phil does, featherlight steps that ghost across the hardwood floors as Techno leads him back to the bedroom. A glance at the bathroom reveals Dream’s clothes—including his boxers, Techno is embarrassed to realize—slung over the shower railing to dry.

Dream sits on the bed and curls his uninjured leg under himself, sipping at the tea without bothering to remove the bag. He looks like he belongs there, the sleeves of his sweater falling down over his hands and the neck of it open just enough to expose part of his collarbone. The redness on his face continues down his neck, and Techno frowns at that as he sits down in front of him with the lotion in hand.

“You’re not having an allergic reaction to something, right?” he asks. Dream sets the mug of tea to the side and rolls his sleeves up, exposing the scar on his forearm and the peeling skin on his knuckles.

“My skin’s just sensitive,” Dream says, pulling his hair back behind his ears again. It’s past his chin now, straight and thin. The few times Techno’s touched it, it’s been soft as silk. “The lotion will help, probably. Most of the time I just deal with it.”

“If you say so.” Before he can talk himself out of it, Techno reaches forward, grabbing one of Dream’s hands between his own and running lotion over his fingers. His thumb drags over the delicate bones, smooths over the tendons on the back of his hand, digs into the meat of his palms, and he hears Dream sigh softly.

From there he works his way up over Dream’s wrist, and then the muscle of his arm, the skin warm under Techno’s fingers as he rubs lotion into it. He shifts his attention to the other hand, never pushing beyond the edge of the sleeve, only touching the skin Dream gives him access to—but his touch lingers on that scar, gently tracing the length of that old wound. However Dream had gotten it, at least it had been cared for correctly.

There are other scars, now that he’s looking, fine white lines on his knuckles, and the iron ring on his little finger warms under Techno’s touch. He finds himself running his thumb over it a few more times, just to feel the contrast between metal and skin, before reluctantly pulling his hands away. When he looks up, Dream’s gaze is on his own hands, his lower lip caught between his teeth again and a flush on his cheeks.

“I’m gonna get your face now,” Techno tells him, swallowing past the dryness in his throat. Dream nods, once, but shuts his eyes when Techno reaches forward.

The skin on his hands was soft. The skin on his face is softer, his lashes pale where they rest on his cheeks, his lips slightly parted as Dream releases the lower one to breathe. The rawness is worse on his cheeks and under his eyes, and anywhere his hair managed to plaster itself during their run through the rain. Maybe his skin really is just sensitive like that. Easy to chafe.

The pale scar on his cheek looks almost like the line of a mask, and Techno toys with that idea for just a second—that Dream could be an up-and-coming hero, or a villain about to make his name, masquerade mask resting jauntily on his nose. He'd pick something subtle, Techno thinks. All his shirts are dark and subdued in color.

His hands are gently wrapped around Dream's neck when he asks, "Is there a reason why you won't let us give you a place to stay?"

Dream huffs out a tiny laugh, his lips curving in a smile as his eyes remain closed. Touching him this much is risky beyond measure, but Techno is starving for it, can't bring himself to pull his hands away. His skin is so warm, and so soft, and it's been ages since Techno's let himself touch anyone but his family. He knows how dangerous this is, and yet—

"I have a house, Techno," Dream whispers, his smile curling around the words until it's like they're a joke shared between them. It makes Techno's heart ache, because Dream won't trust him with the truth but he'll trust him with this, and the second feels infinitely more precious.

"You say that, and yet I've never met her," Techno says, voice bland, his palms moving up to cup Dream's cheeks again. He doesn't have a reason for it. He just wants to touch.

"You always call my house a woman." Dream's lips are a little chapped, but this lotion isn't the sort that should go on mouths. He doesn't have chapstick. "What if my house is a man, Techno, what then?"

"So you're tellin' me that *he's* going to a school in Canada?" Techno licks his own lips, slowly pulling his hands away. "That's very, uh, enlightened of you."

Dream's hands catch his before they can move any further, palms searing hot against Techno's knuckles. His eyes are open to the barest of slits, glancing up at Techno through the veil of his lashes, and the intensity of the focus steals his breath away. He's never had Dream's eyes meet his for longer than a few seconds, and the longer he stares into them, the more it feels like he's falling. Like he's flying.

"Dream?" he whispers, hyperaware of the distance that barely exists between them, the weight of the emerald in his ear.

"I have some stuff going on right now," Dream says, throat bobbing as he swallows. "Some really serious stuff, actually. But after—after—when this is done. When I have time. Do you—Would you—"

He should say no. He should yank his hands free and apologize for getting too comfortable. Techno isn't built for this kind of intimacy, and he's going to get Dream killed if he lets this go any further.

And yet, he can't stop himself from saying, "When you have time, I'll say yes."

Nightmare - Dream
Nemesis - Niki

Originally, they were supposed to kiss at this point, but the problem is that a) Dream takes his job as a hero deadly serious and won't put a civilian at risk and b) Techno did just kind of maybe accidentally murder the other man he loves, so, you know. The mood ain't right.

Guess y'all just have to wait a couple more chapters for that one.

empty promises

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream isn't quite sure how it happens, but he stays the night at Techno's place. The storms don't let up until close to noon the next day, and Niki texts him to let him know the bakery will be closed that day and the day after, so it's not as if he has anywhere to be.

If Techno's brother is rude, petty, and inclined to barbed compliments, his father is surprisingly laid back. Dream isn't sure how a man as dressed down and casual as Phil managed to raise two high strung theater kids, but he finds himself laughing at the way Phil swears at his sons and loses his temper with his cooking. Finds himself relaxing, even if he's uncomfortably aware of the lies piling up around him.

The lotion had helped, and when Techno leaves to help Phil with dinner the first night (muttering under his breath about burning the building down) he steals the bottle and hides in the bathroom. His jeans hadn't soaked as quickly as his shirt had, so his legs are mostly okay compared to his chest—but his feet are raw, stinging with every step he takes, and he's just grateful that Techno never bothered to look at them. Dream steals a pair of socks anyways, hissing between his teeth as he pulls them over lotioned skin.

If he's lucky, they won't blister. He's really, really hoping to be lucky.

The couch is a lot more comfortable than his apartment floor, and it keeps him up for hours when everyone else goes to bed. It's been about a month and a half since the last time he was in the Tower, and he's already lost his familiarity with soft bedding; without the ache in his spine and the hard, bruising flooring against his shoulder blades, he just can't seem to relax. At some point, a switch in his head flipped, and now comfort feels dangerous to him.

His eyes are shut and his breathing even when Phil leaves in the middle of the night, and he's still fighting to sleep when the man comes back a few hours later. Dream files those facts away, but doesn't question it. Even in Esempli, a late-night run isn't uncommon.

"Sleep well?" Phil asks early next morning, when the rising sun is turning the apartment a soft pink. Dream watches it out the window, nostalgia thick in his chest and leaving a lump in his throat, and only turns away from the sight at Phil's voice.

It takes him a moment to answer, the bullet wound in his thigh throbbing to the same pulse as the burns on his feet. "Well enough, I guess. Your couch is a lot softer than I thought."

"Yeah, it'll eat you." Phil's voice is amiable, but there's a flinty look in his blue eyes that makes Dream wary. He wonders what he did wrong, to cause that coldness where there wasn't any last night. "You were up pretty late, is all."

Ah. He hadn't been as stealthy pretending to sleep as he thought. "Like I said, softer than I'm used to. Kind of funny how both of us were up all night, but we're still the only ones awake a

reasonable hour *now*.”

Phil laughs, some of the ice in his expression thawing. He’s starting up a pot of coffee along with setting the kettle to boil, and he opens the fridge with a contemplative hum to regard breakfast options. “True, true. It’s impossible to get Wilbur out of bed before noon, and with the bakery closed...”

“Can I—” He stops himself, halfway up off the couch, freezing when Phil glances at him again. “Uh, I mean, if you have the stuff for pancakes, I can—”

“Man of many talents, aren’t you? I won’t say no to pancakes.” Phil gestures for him to come into the kitchen, and after a moment of internal debate, Dream does, wincing with every step. He can play it off as his leg injury, the same one that Techno noticed yesterday. Probably.

“Do you have any frozen fruit or anything?” Dream asks as he’s handed a bowl and the pancake mix, measuring by memory rather than glancing at the instructions. Phil’s kind enough to locate all the ingredients for him, handing over buttermilk and eggs before pulling open the freezer.

“Blueberries work for you, mate?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, just passes the plastic container over before pouring himself a cup of coffee. “Make a couple batches, the boys will eat their own bodyweight in pancakes.”

“Noted,” Dream says dryly, running butter along the inside of a pan as it starts to heat. The last time he did this, his whole world fell apart the same day. He hopes that this time will be different, that he’ll be able to make pancakes without a feeling of impending doom, that his little morning ritual won’t be ruined.

(He wants, someday, to make pancakes for Sapnap and George again, and to hear them bicker and laugh.)

“Are you supposed to be on that leg?” Phil asks when the serving plate is filled with stacks four pancakes high. Dream’s been shifting off and on, trying not to put too much weight on it while also not leaving his feet blistered. It’s starting to hurt pretty bad, but he’s used to working through pain.

“Probably not,” he says anyways, because a civilian wouldn’t think like that. “It’s not too bad though, so I can just grab some Tylenol later if it gets worse.”

“Sit down and I can finish the rest of the batch.” Phil takes the spatula from him when he tries to protest, and Dream sighs instead of fighting for it. He’s pretty sure he would win, but he doesn’t want to be the guy who beats up his crush’s dad.

Not that he has a crush on Techno. He’s just got... an interest, is all. Crushes are for babies and people who want to be bullied relentlessly by Sapnap.

It is easier to stay off his feet though. He stretches his legs out, flexing his fingers against the tightness in his skin. The day after getting caught in the rain, it feels like he’s got a fullbody

sunburn, but not much worse than that. Not for the first time, he's grateful that he isn't as sensitive to water as Ranboo is. Was.

"You know," Phil says as he flips the pancakes Dream had already poured into the pan, "I love my sons. More than anything."

"That's... good?" He's not sure what kind of response is expected here. He's never had parents, the Captain the closest to an authority figure he wanted affection from when he was younger, so he's not sure how this usually goes.

(Bad tries, with warm hands on his shoulders and a fresh breakfast every time Dream stops by their apartments in the Tower, but he and Skeppy already have one kid, and Dream's just one of a dozen orphans tossed into a group home on the lower levels.

Erebus is kind, in their own way, but they're distant too. It takes years before Dream learns that it's because they feel every scrape, every bruise, every bit of harm that festers in the souls of the people around them, a fucked up form of empathy that makes them too hungry to let themselves get close. It's safer for everyone if they keep their distance.

Ares doesn't try at all, with his moodswings and his crude jokes; if there's anyone in the tower that Dream fears, it's him, and it's a fear that turns into contempt once he's expected to work with the hero-turned-President on a regular basis.

The Captain is the one he likes best, the one who smooths his hair back from his brow and tells him stories when he asks and promises that he'll be something, that he'll be the *best* someday. She's the one he wants to be like when he's a hero, and she's the one that stops by the group home to check on the parentless kids in the hero track most often.

He doesn't remember much of Zephyrus. A smile, underneath the brim of a wide hat. Wings that curl around him like a hug, the one time Dream stumbles across him on the rooftop. By the time Dream is brave enough to look at heroes other than the Captain, Zephyrus is gone, turning his back on the Federation and all it stands for.)

"I'd do anything for them," Phil continues, apparently unfazed by Dream's confusion. "They're the only thing in the world that matters to me, these days. Making sure they're happy? That's my job, as a dad."

Dream opens his mouth to ask why he's saying this now, then shuts it when Phil turns to set a plate in front of him. The hard glint is back in his eyes, something predatory and dangerous that makes Dream redouble his usual efforts not to meet his someone's gaze.

"Techno likes you. Don't give me a reason to regret that." Phil gives his shoulder a squeeze, lighting the nerves there on fire, then turns back to the stove. Dream tries to shake off the feeling of dread curling in his gut.

A week later, his skin is no longer stretched too tight over his bones and he can run without falling three steps in. The bullet burn isn't *healed*, not entirely, but he pulls the stitches out

and rubs antibiotic cream into it before declaring it good enough. He's been off the streets for too long as it is, and he itches to get back to work.

He stops three robberies, none of them serious, then knocks out a guy stalking after someone like they're prey. Between acts of violence masquerading as heroism, he checks on his informants, spending an hour at the Pub shooting the shit with Jack before he finally leaves. It's a relief to be out on the streets again, sprinting across rooftops and swinging from fire escapes before dropping to the ground. It's not raining for the first time in days, but the air is heavy and humid, thick with the scent of wet asphalt.

Close to two in the morning, just when he'd resigned himself to meeting him a different night, Protesilaus makes his appearance, standing alone at the edge of one of the tallest buildings in sixth, staring at the Tower where it rises into the dark clouds.

It's tempting to live up to his namesake and go *'boo!'* but he's better than that. Even if a week cooped up in his apartment has him bouncing on his toes and reaching for his axe in anticipation of a fight.

"Hey," he calls, and Protesilaus jumps like he's seen a ghost. "Wow, you're nervy tonight. Something happen?"

"...Hector." There's an odd note in Protesilaus's voice, something that lingers between wonder and disbelief. "You're alive."

"Uh, yeah, last I checked." Dream makes a production of looking over himself, twisting and turning before throwing his arms wide. All in one piece, he doesn't say, only tips his head to the side like he's inviting Protesilaus to do an examination of his own.

"I thought..." He never finds out what the wither hybrid thought, because Protesilaus shakes his head slightly and clears his throat. "We've been looking into that for you, but it doesn't look like there's any records of items taken off inmates when they're sent to Pandora's Vault. Everything I can get information on is for more typical arrests that leave people in the local jails."

"Damn." Dream lets his arms drop, taking the couple steps forward to join Protesilaus at the edge of the roof. He's still itching to fight, but there's something oddly fragile to the way Protesilaus is standing. Even if Dream can't see them, he can feel Protesilaus's eyes locked on his face, his mask. Like he can't quite believe what he's seeing.

It reminds him, abruptly, of Technoblade, and the gentle way he'd held Dream's hands. Like he couldn't imagine having the chance to hold someone's hands, like the mere existence of Dream's skin against his own was something wonderful.

"We can try and get into the Tower records, but that's going to be difficult," Protesilaus says eventually. "With Nemesis as active as she's been, it would mean sending Zephyrus instead to keep the heat off her. That's going to take time to arrange."

"Too risky," Dream tells him, looking at the Tower he'd spent most of his life in. He knows where they keep the records that aren't kept at City Hall, and he knows that the Vault and its

contents are more closely guarded than even the prison. Which. Hm. “I’m going to hit the prison and see if I can find anything there.”

“You’re going to what.” Protesilaus’s voice is flat and disbelieving for a different reason now.

“I’m going to hit the prison,” Dream repeats, grinning behind his mask. “Not tonight, not tomorrow night, but the night after. I’m going to stick to the record rooms and where they keep information on prisoners, so there shouldn’t be any reason for them to increase security on the cells. And this will be a good test for breaking its defenses—you want to raid it and get everyone out, right?”

“Our stance on Pandora’s Vault is well known,” Protesilaus says, “but you cannot be serious about this. What if the Warden catches you?”

Dream turns to him, the Tower at his back, and leans closer. “That’s where the Syndicate comes in.”

A well rested, nearly fully healed Nightmare crouches on a buoy, shifting his weight with it as it rocks. He’s stretched himself to the limit again, extending his range as far as he can to bounce from docks to boats to buoys until he’s here, just outside the prison itself. Its location off the coast of Esempi, well into the lake and its freezing waters, is just one of the things that makes it so secure. The island it was built on is manmade, crafted at the Warden’s behest with his notes on its design.

It is, theoretically, impenetrable. Dream’s going to test that theory tonight.

He’s been studying the blueprints for the last couple days, working out his entry point and his exit point. The Warden rarely leaves the premises, but Dream’s hoping that the distraction in first district—Zephyrus and Orpheus holding a charity gala hostage, making sure the city’s wealthiest are fearing for their lives—is going to be serious enough for an all-hands-on-deck call out. There have been a few of those in his career, and he knows how seriously Schlatt takes the safety of their biggest donors.

The buoy clangs underneath him as he pulls his phone out and checks the live feed from the gala, Zephyrus sweeping between suits and gowns with his black wings spread threateningly as Orpheus stands on stage and croons commands into the mic. Heroes are two minutes out, the report says. Hostage negotiation is taking priority.

“Showtime,” Dream whispers, stuffing his phone back into his pocket before standing.

Between one breath and the next, he’s standing on the walls of the prison. It’s the longest jump he’s made yet, and he stumbles when he lands. Before one of the guards in the towers can see him, he jumps again, orienting himself based on the Warden’s office where it overlooks the yard. This time, he lands in a storage closet, cleaning supplies stacked high around him and the smell of bleach in his nose.

Alright. He’s in, which is the second hardest part of his job tonight. Dream pulls up his memory of the blueprints, blinking in the darkness, and frowns. The cells are a giant blank

spot against his powers, that awareness he has of where he's going to jump blocked off. That'll be the obsidian in them. But he can also feel a *second* point of blankness, set away from the cells, where it shouldn't exist based on the blueprints he stole. That means one of two things: the files in the archives under City Hall are out of date... or this room was added without permission from the rest of the Federation.

Dream knows which option he's putting his money on. And it just means that if Schlatt is up to something at Pandora's Vault, then the Warden is right there with him. His jaw tightens, but he can't go looking for Schlatt's little experimentation chamber right now. He doesn't want to tip them off to his real purpose here.

Ideally, he doesn't want to be discovered at all, but with the number of cameras, he knows that's a pipe dream. Dream teleports, trying to minimize how often he's on them anyways, landing in another cleaning closet, a mostly hidden section of the laundry room and then, finally, the offices just underneath the Warden's outlook.

He takes a moment to breathe. The guards might be on shift for twenty-four hours a day, but the paper pushers work eight to five and even the most dedicated of them is long gone. Since he's made it this far without incident, he tentatively begins to hope the rest of this will go as smoothly.

At least, he hopes that until he opens the first filing cabinet and realizes that he's an idiot. Probably the second biggest idiot in the city. The *first* biggest idiot is whoever designed the filing system the way they did, because the archives were impenetrable but the prison is just a *mess*. They're not organized by date, or time, or alphabetical order. It's a stretch to call them organized at all. The system appears to be 'if it fits in a cabinet, it goes there' and damn to whoever might need that information later.

"What the fuck," Dream says, unable to help himself. He says it softly, but his voice still sounds loud in the silence of the admin offices.

Nothing for it. With a sigh of resignation and a quick check of his phone—Zephyrus is fighting both Team Epsilon and the Warden without apparent effort, and Orpheus is puppeting donors into harm's way to keep a different group of heroes off his back—he starts pulling all the files from each cabinet and sorting them as best he can.

He decides on working by date, since that's the easiest way for him to check for whatever it is Schlatt acquired. Dream remembers when the crackdown on bringing in villains alive happened, about two years ago, and he figures that's a good place to start. Before then, the rule had been alive when possible, dead otherwise. At the time, he'd thought the change was a good thing.

Remembering that list of names, powers, and casual references to letters of condolences, Dream's not so sure about that anymore.

He stacks the prisoner disciplinary and medical records on one desk, and the guard schedules and write ups on a different desk. The rest of the files get sorted on the floor by year, then month, because half of them don't indicate what they're supposed to be and the other half

might have information about confiscated items. It's slow going, and while anxiety creeps up his spine at first, boredom replaces it soon enough.

It's just... extremely tedious work. He's never bothered to set up music on his phone, otherwise he'd shove an earbud in and at least entertain himself that way. As it is, he finds himself humming softly, tapping out rhythms on the floor, bouncing his knee and bobbing his head as he sorts through piles and piles of papers.

Dream wishes he had his team, because misery shared is misery halved, and both Sapnap and George would hate this as much as he does. Failing that, he'd take Team Sigma and the undoubtedly useless chaos they'd bring to the table. He just thinks it would be really funny trying to sit Tommy down long enough to make him sort files. It wouldn't be helpful, just funny.

He narrows down the files from two years ago and starts with January. There are a lot of prisoners in Pandora's Vault, and only half of them truly deserve to be here, by Dream's reckoning. It makes for slow going.

It's only as he's part of the way through April of last year that a shiver of unease rolls through him. Dream frowns, then looks up, craning his head around to try and figure out what set his paranoia off. There's nothing in the office itself, and he hasn't heard a guard pass by in a while, even though he's been keeping one ear out so he can flick off his flashlight. His flashlight which he isn't using, actually, since the soft glow of dawn through the windows is enough for him to see by.

He freezes, not even daring to breathe.

Dawn. The sun is rising. He's been here for *hours*, and the Warden is due back at any second. He needs to leave before anyone else comes up here.

But when he scrambles to his feet and yanks open the door, he's greeted by gilded armor and a gas mask, the Warden's eyes hidden behind the smoked glass of his goggles. He doesn't look surprised to see Nightmare. In fact, he looks like he expected this.

"Nightmare," he says, voice flat and distorted by the filter in his mask. "I was wondering how long it would take you to notice me."

"Fuck," Dream whispers, before slamming the door shut again and throwing himself backwards.

The door snaps inwards with a godawful bang as Dream rushes to the windows, grabbing a chair along the way and flinging it against the glass. It cracks, but not enough, even as he brings the chair in for a second strike, and a third. The fourth strike never comes, because he has to throw himself backwards to dodge the trident that slices into the space where he'd been standing a second ago.

He can't just teleport without thinking, not in the prison. It's too risky, too likely that he'll end up in front of a guard or behind bars, somewhere that can be turned into a cage within moments.

The trident smashes through a desk as Dream dodges again, yanking his axe free. It's a bad weapons matchup; the Warden has reach on him, and he can't risk tangling his axe in the tines of the trident, not when that would leave him without any weapon at all. But he can use its handle to knock the trident away from his vulnerable throat as he falls to the ground and rolls before scrambling for the door.

"Stop running and come peacefully," the Warden orders, storming after him as he slams into the hall and starts sprinting. Dream has the speed, but the creeper hybrid has home turf advantage, and he can't stop long enough to catch his bearings.

He grabs the railing of a set of stairs and freezes. Down is faster. Up means he'll be able to see where he's going, instead of trying to teleport through the walls blind. After a split second of indecision, he turns to run up the stairs, but even a second of hesitation is too long.

"*Fuck!*" he shouts, staggering as the trident slams into his back, tines piercing through his hoodie and burying themselves in his ribs. He's lucky that the bone makes it rebound, agonizing pain and cracked ribs the only thing he carries up the stairs. If the trident were still buried in his back, this would be much harder.

As it is, it's hard enough. He can't quite breathe right, and he's moving slower than he needs to be, stumbling as he hits the topmost landing and books it down another hallway. The Warden follows, implacable, and the trident strikes the wall next to him when Dream takes a corner just a fraction too slow.

Shit, shit, shit. He hooks his axe back on his belt, afraid that it'll overbalance him at this point. There aren't any windows in this hall, but he takes a left, then a right, finds another set of stairs and starts climbing. A door at the top represents freedom and he slams into it as hard as he can, scrabbling at the handle until it swings open.

The guard behind it stands, shocked, and reaches for his gun, but Dream is faster to punch him in the throat. Distantly, he can hear the alarm, wild and wailing, cutting through his thoughts before he can gather them. The sun is on his right, which means the city is to his left, and he needs to make the jump to the wall before he can jump to the buoy, and then—

A scream tears itself from his throat as the Warden's trident slams into his side, throwing him against the window. He screams again when it's torn back out, the Warden's foot landing on the wound and pinning him there. It hurts so fucking bad that he can't breathe, and he desperately hopes that's the only reason why, that his lung isn't punctured and he's not slowly dying.

"This could have been avoided if you simply surrendered," the Warden says, bending down and reaching for his mask. He won't recognize the face underneath it, but if he figures out that Dream is wearing a nullifier as well...

Sun to his right. Dream breathes in, accepts the risk, and teleports.

He can't help a soft sob of pain when he drops on top of the wall thirty feet away. On shaking hands, he shoves himself upright, tipping his head back to see the Warden's blank gas mask staring down at him. There's the dull clang of a buoy, just barely audible under the sirens

shrieking in the dawn air, and Dream tears his gaze away from the Warden as he teleports again.

A buoy. He catches the ring at the top and clings for a second. A boat. Blood smears across the white fiberglass as he skids down the deck. A buoy. The water laps at his heels as he misses his mark and nearly falls in. A boat. One of the sailors gasps and reaches for the radio as he catches his breath.

Docks. The wood is burning wet under his palms. Docks. The seagulls are crying, and it sounds like a woman lets out a startled gasp. Pavement. Parking lot. Alleyway. Rooftop.

Dream jumps and jumps and jumps, uncaring of who might be watching now. He's bleeding, and he can't breathe, and he *hurts*. He needs to get somewhere safe before the Warden can catch up and finish the job, before he stops being able to move, much less teleport. He needs to get somewhere that he can be taken care of, where gentle hands will help him bandage his wounds and he won't have to worry about being turned in.

The window box outside of the bedroom isn't rated for his weight, but Dream lays on it as he slams a palm sluggishly against the glass. It only takes three hollow thumps that rattle the panes before it's yanked open, the person inside sucking in a sharp breath at the sight of him.

"I'm sorry," he whispers to Technoblade, "I didn't know where else to go."

Chapter End Notes

Nightmare/Hermes - Dream
Protesilaus - Techno
Zephyrus - Philza
Orpheus - Wilbur
The Warden - Sam
Erebus - Eret
The Captain - Puffy
Ares - Schlatt

Dream: *opens door to the Warden standing right there*

Dream: *shuts door immediately*

Dream: Well that solves that problem.

lies we tell ourselves

Chapter Notes

Gonna be honest, I meant to upload this like three hours ago but I've had a kitten curled up on my face instead. She's so cute, I'm gonna die.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream wakes up to pain, which isn't unusual, but the dullness of it is. Each breath hurts but in a distant way, like someone has gone through the effort to dose him up. The last time he felt this way, he'd been hospitalized with a fractured neck, and the healer had been unavailable for almost a week.

That was before they'd lost their healer entirely. Iapyx had been a good man, Dream remembers, and he hadn't deserved the brutal death he got. The only thing they'd been able to bury was his arm.

With a soft, pained groan, he rolls onto his side, gasping quietly when that ignites fire along his ribs. Before he can finish rolling and push himself upright, a hand grabs his shoulder and sets him on his back again. He blinks at it, the painted nails and the ruffled sleeve of a poet's shirt, then blinks at his own hand when it drops on top of the one pinning him down. His fingers are slightly tanned, a hint of freckles smattered along his wrist. Human. His disguise is still on, then.

"Techno," he whispers, throat sticking on the word as he swallows to try and relieve the dryness.

"You're in my bed," Techno says, grip easing now that he's sure Dream won't try and sit up again. His palm is warm when his hand shifts up to cup Dream's cheek, thumb trailing over the curve of his cheekbone. "Do you remember how you ended up here?"

"Not the... backend of the journey." Dream's voice rasps and clicks as he shuts his eyes and leans into the warmth, swallowing again. He can feel Techno's fingers slide into his hair, coaxing him upright gently without letting him roll back onto his side again.

A moment later, there's a straw at his lips, and he sucks down the water gratefully.

"You landed outside my window, bleeding," Techno says, shifting so that Dream is pressed against his chest. One of Dream's hands clumsily wraps around the cup, freeing Techno to run his fingers through his hair instead. It's nice.

"I remember that." It's easier to talk now that his throat isn't so dry, and he sighs softly. "Getting to the docks was a problem, and then the journey between there and here gets... fuzzy. I don't think I left a blood trail. I hope not, anyways."

“Hm.” That’s the only thing Techno says, cradling him close. Dream basks in that, the warmth and the feeling of hands on his skin. How long had it been since he’d gotten a hug? Sappnap was pretty free with his affections, but he hasn’t seen Sappnap since everything went to shit.

Tears prick at the corner of his eyes, and he swallows another gulp of water to force the grief back down as well. It’s just the drugs making him weepy. Just the pain making him miserable.

“Sorry,” he says, opening his eyes again. Techno frowns at him, but he doesn’t say that there’s nothing to apologize for. “I shouldn’t be dragging a civilian into this, not with the people I’m pissing off, but I just—I didn’t know where else to go. I’m sorry, Techno.”

Techno’s lips thin, his gold-framed glasses sliding further down his nose as he bends his head down to look at him. Dream focuses on the strong line of his nose, the slight flush on his cheeks, so he doesn’t risk meeting those red eyes with his own. There’s something wary in his voice when Techno says, “You think I’m mad ‘cause I’m a civilian?”

“You should be,” Dream tells him honestly. “This wasn’t fair of me to do to you. I’m putting you at risk by being here, and if anyone realizes that you might know who Nightmare is—”

“What’s your power?” Techno interrupts him to ask.

He blinks, then frowns, then blinks again. That’s not the sort of question he was expecting, not with the revelation that he’s a notorious vigilante. After dropping half-dead on his crush’s doorstep (windowsill), that’s pretty much the last thing on his mind. “What?”

“Your power.” Techno’s eyes trail over his face, hunting for something. “I know you have one, if you can touch the Blood God without dying.”

“His name’s Protesilaus.” He says it blankly, brain whirring as he tries to think. Has his immunity to powers ever been advertised? He doesn’t think so. Only his ability to teleport, and the conclusions drawn from that are for other people to worry about.

A hint of a smile quirks Techno’s lips to the side, and his fingers are gentle as he smooths Dream’s hair back. “Yeah, I know. But that’s not answerin’ the question, Hector.”

“I’m immune to other people’s powers,” Dream tells him, leaning into the touch, before realizing what Techno had called him. “Wait, did you say—”

“I’m not mad, Dream. I’m not a civilian either.” Techno presses a gentle kiss to his brow, and for a moment, Dream can feel the warmth of soulfire wrapping around him, Techno’s pink hair catching alight before the emerald in his ear suppresses it again.

How had he never noticed that before?

“Oh,” he whispers, blinking away tears before they can fall. Had it been just a few days ago that he’d thought Protesilaus reminded him of Techno? Maybe he’s always seen it, just never wanted to acknowledge it, that the person who caught him outside a bakery and tenderly

smoothed lotion into his hands was also the same person who'd once driven his sword through Dream's gut, who'd nearly carved one of George's legs off and killed so many people with just a touch.

Everything's all screwed up now. Hermes has killed fewer people than Protesilaus, but he's delivered far more into the misery of the prison, to be experimented on by a power-hungry autocrat and an apathetic warden. Nightmare hasn't killed anyone—that he knows of—but he hasn't done nearly enough to clean up the streets either, too caught up in his own revenge. Dream wants to be mad, wants to be furious that his handsome sometimes-coworker is secretly a supervillain, but the truth is, he's not sure that matters. Not when his own hands are soaked in blood.

He's just tired. And confused. His ribs are broken on his right side, and there's holes in his chest on his left side.

"Well, fuck." He fumbles the glass of water and Techno takes it from him, setting it on the windowsill before it can spill. "There goes my whole speech about noble self-sacrifice."

Techno laughs, a single sharp bark, then shifts himself further onto the bed as he pulls Dream close. It's easy to fit himself up under Techno's chin, his nose pressed into the soft skin at his neck, one of Techno's hands curling around the wound in his side. Dream can feel the bandages pulling with every breath, and he's not wearing his costume anymore, bundled up in one of Techno's sweaters instead.

For a moment, he lets himself have this: Techno's arms around him, Techno's chest warm and steady under Dream's back, the dull ache of pain easy to ignore. But his mind is whirring, spinning through everything he knows about Protesilaus—about Techno—about the lean frame of Orpheus where he towers, like Wilbur, and about the fire in Phil's eyes that burns brighter than the sky at midsummer, like Zephyrus. About Niki, Techno's old friend, who had to call out the morning Nemesis got in a confrontation near the Tower.

"The Syndicate," Dream says, and Techno tenses up. "Is Phil actually your dad?"

"That's a loaded question." Techno shifts underneath him, moving them both until they're propped up against the wall, Dream in his lap and Techno's arms wrapped around him. The glass of water is within reach, but Dream leaves his hands on Techno's arms instead.

"It's just that—" Zephyrus had wrapped a wing around him, once, before he'd defected, and then left dozens of cuts along Dream's skin with his knives after. "—I never heard of Zephyrus having kids."

With a sigh, Techno's cheek presses to the top of his head, and Dream shuts his eyes. "Wilbur and I are adopted. Phil kept it quiet, back when he was a hero, because he didn't want anyone using us against him, but after I... You know, the original proposals for the prison included sections for people with dangerous powers that hadn't broken any laws yet?"

"Yeah. I saw the drafts, when I was looking for the blueprints." Dream swallows, thinking of Schlatt's signature on those drafts. Of Schlatt's experiments written down. Had he been

thinking too short on the timeline? Had he taken the push to bring villains in alive as Schlatt's descent into darkness, when it had started much sooner?

"Phil about lost his mind when he saw that. Nether hybrids were on the short list, but anyone with a power that was deemed unsafe was at risk too. And the worst was that, even after he got them to walk that back, he could tell it was just because they didn't have the votes. It didn't have anything to do with what's right."

"But they built the prison," Dream says, considering the Syndicate's actions over the last couple years. "They built it, and the Syndicate wasn't active until five years ago. What happened?"

"Phil wasn't going to let us do anything until we were old enough to make that choice, for one. For another, in the early days, it did get used the way it was supposed to, in theory. Only the most dangerous villains, only the people who didn't want to change." Techno's arms tighten, and his voice goes hard. "Didn't last long, obviously."

Dream does the math in his head. Protesilaus and Orpheus debuted five years ago, about eight months after Hermes had officially been granted top rank, after Vulcan had just been confirmed. Is he older than Technoblade? Or did Zephyrus work off the traditional hero confirmation age, before it had been lowered to sixteen? Is Techno twenty-five or twenty-one? "What changed?"

"That son of a bitch Hermes started throwing anyone who looked at him sideways into the prison," Techno says, his voice flat and hard. Which is—

Dream blinks his eyes open, staring at the bookshelf across the room. There's a bunch of books on old myths and legends, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Norse. An old hardback of Homer's epics, big enough to be used as a weapon. A few knickknacks, scattered between the stacks, and what looks like the *Art of War* set in a place of honor on its own.

He never did that. He prioritized arrests, yes, because he's always felt that killing should not be the only option, but there wasn't an ulterior motive. Pandora's Vault has been active as long as he's been working as a hero, and he wasn't the only one sending villains to be jailed. But maybe, Dream thinks, maybe he is the one who'd been best at his job.

"You hate him, don't you," he says, the power nullifier around his pinky finger feeling more like a noose around his neck. "Hermes."

Techno's breath hisses between his teeth. "We've never been able to kill him, and his team's the one always sent out after us when we move. It's made getting forward momentum on breaking into the prison hard. And that was before he—"

Silence falls, Techno's breathing harsh, Dream barely breathing at all. Everyone thinks he killed Lethe, even the Syndicate. And for some reason, that angers Techno more than everything else. As much as he wants to defend himself, he can't, not when Techno clearly loathes his hero identity and Dream doesn't have any evidence to clear his name. Not yet.

But if he's honest with himself, even when he does have the evidence, he thinks he might not tell the truth. Hermes can't afford to fall in love with Protesilaus. There's no rule against Dream doing the same thing.

Eventually, Techno clears his throat and says, "So, the Warden caught you. Were you able to find what you were looking for, at least?"

Dream can't stop himself from grimacing, hand twitching to the gauze on his side for a second. It stings, knowing that he failed and maybe tipped Schlatt off for no reason, but he can't lie. "No, I didn't. I couldn't even get through a year of files before he caught me. And I might have been looking in the *wrong* year, so I don't even know if—"

"Maybe we can help." Techno's fingers trail over his ribs, palm pressing through the fabric of the sweater as it curls over the injury Dream wants to touch. "You haven't told me what you're looking for, just that it's something Schlatt is using and you think he got it off a prisoner."

"It's—" He hesitates. Will it sound absurd, if he says it out loud? "It's a book. Schlatt's using some kind of book, and when he uses it, he can steal the powers from people. But I think, I'm not sure but I *think*, that they have to die for it to work."

"That's fucked up." Techno falls silent, his hand flexing as Dream gives into temptation and covers it with his own, sliding his fingers between Techno's until they're locked together. It's not quite holding hands, but it's not *not* holding hands either.

"He's missing the other one. The other book. Whatever he's doing, it's not working the way he wants it to, because he needs both books. I think that's the only reason he hasn't killed more people." Dream swallows, thinking of that second obsidian room. "I think, if he manages to find the other book, he'll be much worse."

There's a soft hum from behind him, Techno's mouth pressing to his hair as his chest rises and falls. The anger from earlier is mostly gone, leaving warmth in its place. "So you've been trying to figure out what the first book is?"

"Yeah." Dream sighs, shutting his eyes again as he basks in the warmth. At this point, he doesn't have any better leads; everything he traces down points to Schlatt covertly feeling out people with useful powers, who he then gets thrown in prison. Some of them are coerced, but not in any ways Dream can prove. Without the book, and the motive, the worst that can be said is that Schlatt's overzealous about protecting the city.

He knows that's exactly the line the man will use, too. Otherwise, he would have killed Dream, not Ranboo. Schlatt wants a scapegoat, wants the adulation that comes from being the savior of Esemipi, and he's good at covering his tracks.

"Maybe that's not the thing to go hunting for." At his noise of protest, Techno squeezes his fingers. "Look, you've been working this case for weeks, right? And this is the second or third time you've tried to find information about where he got the book without getting anywhere. So maybe you should focus on the second book instead?"

“But I don’t even know what it *looks* like,” Dream says, frustrated. “I know it’s a book, I know its part of a matched set, but I don’t know what they do, or where they came from, or how Schlatt even got the first one. I thought if I could prove he was doing this, I wouldn’t even need to find the book itself. I just want people to know what he’s *doing* .”

“People are gullible,” Techno tells him, voice flat. “Even if you have all the proof in the world, you won’t convince ‘em. So instead of trying to take him down the legal way, assuming you can’t just kill him—”

“Yeah, I’m gonna kill *Ares* , I don’t have a death wish, Techno—”

“—why don’t you stop what he’s planning instead?” Techno’s breath ruffles his hair when he sighs at Dream’s silence, his arms squeezing just enough for Dream to feel it. “You’re thinking like a hero, Dream. I know you’re a vigilante and all, but you can’t afford to think like that. Time to start thinking like a villain instead.”

“I’m not that much of a hero,” he mutters, frowning down at his borrowed sweater.

“Yeah, you got a sense of humor for one.” Lips press to the top of his head again and the resentment bleeds out of Dream, replaced by exhaustion instead. Like it or not, Techno is right; Dream hasn’t been able to find anything out about the first book, not anything that will help him clear his name, and he has to focus on actually helping people now. The best way to stop Schlatt, the *only* way to keep him from achieving his fucked up goals, is to get the second book first.

But it hurts. Knowing that he can’t ever be Hermes again. Knowing that Ranboo’s killer is going to get away with it and no one the wiser.

Knowing that he failed.

“Okay,” Dream says, tipping his head back until he can almost see Techno’s face. “You’re right. I don’t like it, but I know you’re right. But none of my contacts have mentioned anything like a second book, and I don’t trust any of them to send them looking for it on purpose.”

“And *that* is where having the Syndicate on your side is going to be useful.” Techno sounds smug, and when Dream squints at him, he’s pretty sure he looks smug too. Dickhead.

“Okay, *Achilles* , tell me your wonderful plan for finding this second book, then.” A wicked grin slices across his face when Techno sputters, and he adds, “I figure, since you’ve been calling me Hector, I get to use the other name you gave me too.”

“Do *not* ,” Techno says, an adorable flush on his cheeks. “I will never hear the end of it if my brother hears you calling me that.”

“Just remember that, for the next time you start thinking you’re better than me,” he says, snuggling back into Techno’s arms. He’s got blackmail for *days* from that first conversation. Even if Wilbur doesn’t like him much, Dream’s pretty sure he can buy some goodwill with that.

Techno clears his throat. “Anyways. I gotta ask the rest of the Syndicate first, because we make these decisions as a group, but if they agree to it—I’ll check some of our contacts. See if maybe they’ve heard something on one of their own operations. They might not know they’ve hit on something important until I tell them, so maybe we’ll have a lead on that book sooner than you think.”

“And if they don’t agree to it?” Dream asks, because his luck hasn’t been good these last couple months.

“Then you and I do our best with your contacts and my personal ones,” Techno tells him. “I let you live on that rooftop ‘cause I agree with you—what Schlatt’s up to is no good, and someone needs to put a stop to it. If I have to fly solo on this with you to help, then I will.”

Dream swallows, because that’s the closest to a declaration of loyalty (of love) that either of them have said. Even if Phil doesn’t agree, even if Wilbur hates his guts, even if Niki decides to fire him after finding out what he does at night, Techno has his back. He’ll see this through to the end of the line.

And once they reach that point, once Dream has to decide what it means to be a hero...

Before he can ask when the next Syndicate meeting is—do they have them in the kitchen, or do they have an actual base to work out of?—there’s a knock at the door. Techno untangles himself, gently helping Dream sit back against the wall, before climbing off the bed and heading for the door. Dream’s back is cold with his absence.

“Yeah?” Techno asks, and Dream can barely make out the green of Phil’s silk robe in the doorway.

“He’s awake,” Phil says, before turning and walking back down the hall.

It’s like Techno’s been struck by lightning. He stiffens, knuckles going white around the doorknob, spine straightening as his knees lock. Dream stares, wondering who they could be talking about, because it clearly isn’t him. Who would get Techno to react this badly?

“Techno?” he asks, breaking whatever spell had been cast. Techno jerks his hand away from the door, takes a half-step out of the room, then freezes and turns back. Joy wars with fear wars with guilt on his face.

“I need to go for a bit,” he says, and the joy is slowly winning against the other two emotions vying for control, “but I’ll talk with the rest of the Syndicate and come back with an answer in a couple hours. Okay?”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Dream says dumbly, unable to say anything else. Not that Techno waits for an answer. He’s already shutting the door behind himself, feet thumping on the floor as he nearly sprints down the hall after his father.

Dream sits still for maybe five minutes before he’s pushing himself to the edge of the bed and sitting there, feet braced against the cold floor. Considering how serious the wounds the Warden gave him were, he’s not sure how he’s up and moving right now, but he’s not going

to question it either. Whatever drugs he's on have him a little foggy but not completely unbalanced, so there's no better time for him to test his range of motion.

He breathes out, slow and careful, then in, then out again. Once he's as settled as he's ever going to get, he pushes himself to his feet, one arm out for balance and the other reaching for the wall in case his legs give out. For a moment, vertigo overwhelms him, the pain in his ribs making him sick—then the moment is over and he's standing. Still hurts to breathe, but he's standing.

Moving slowly, and with something nearby to grab at all times, Dream starts shuffling to the bathroom. His vigilante costume is piled on the floor near the hamper, turtleneck and cargo pants mostly unmarked while the hoodie looks like it belongs on the set of a slasher film. There's a viciously long tear in the side that he can see, and it's more blotchy red-brown with dried blood than it is green anymore.

That's going to be such a pain to get out of the fabric. Dream pauses to stare mournfully at it, and wonders if it might not be a better idea to just steal another one. He can kind of remember which store he'd stolen it from, and lime green is a summer color too, right?

...Should probably get the stains out anyways, just in case. With a sigh, he braces a hand against the wall and bends over to grab it, then groans as he straightens back up again.

"Ow," he says as he makes his way into the bathroom, dumping the hoodie on the toilet lid as he inspects the shower tub. "Ow, ow, ow. How the fuck does this work?"

After some trial and error—he gives up after a minute and sits on the edge of the tub, removing his risk of falling instead—he manages to find the lock for the drain. It takes a bit longer to work out how the faucets are supposed to go, and he manages to turn the shower onto hot and full blast before he figures out the cold bath settings instead, but eventually he gets there. Once there's an inch of water in the tub, he drops his hoodie in, ignoring the faint burn on his skin as he makes sure it's soaked through.

He dries his hands off at the sink, then braces all his weight on the counter as he stares at his reflection. Meeting his own eyes does not trigger the aggression that normally crawls up his spine, but he can feel the anger building for a different reason.

There's no way for him to prove his innocence against Schlatt. Not without help, and he can't trust that anyone he tells will believe him. Without proof, Hermes is always going to be the third fallen hero, the one that killed his own protégé, the one so bad even the Syndicate won't take him in. The one that disappeared and hasn't been seen since that night.

He can stop Schlatt, but he can't get revenge. He can save the day, but Hermes has to die for it to happen.

With a twist of his thumb against the iron ring, the disguise falls. Pale skin, pointed ears, small horns, tail. Green filling the whites of his eyes until they're both livid pools with only the barest slits of pupils to break up the faint glow. White hair, the same shade as his skin, that falls past his chin now and probably needs a cut to keep it in line with his disguise. The scar on his cheek, Zephyrus's last present.

His face. Hermes's face.

It's going to be the last time he sees it. From now on, he's going to be Dream, *just* Dream, a human with a unique power that lets him resist everyone else. He'll be Nightmare, he'll be Hector, he'll be Patroclus just to make Techno blush. He'll be everyone but Hermes, because Hermes died in the Tower when Ranboo did, and it's better for everyone if he stays dead.

"Sorry," he tells the face in the mirror that isn't his anymore, thumb flicking over his ring until it's replaced by blond hair and freckles, rounded ears and flat human teeth. His face. His real face, now.

It's better this way.

Chapter End Notes

Protesilaus - Techno
Hermes/Nightmare - Dream
Lethe - Ranboo
Zephyrus - Philza
Orpheus - Wilbur
Nemesis - Niki
Vulcan - Sapnap
The Warden - Sam
Ares - Schlatt

Boy, it sure is a good thing that all those secret identity shenanigans have been cleared up! Absolutely no one is hiding any secrets from each other, and everyone being honest is going to make this go so much more smoothly!

:)

trust

Chapter Notes

Double update because I'm three chapters ahead at this point, so I'm feeling alright tossing another chapter up. If you haven't seen it yet, chapter 8 went up this morning.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ponk is stepping out of Ranboo's private room when Techno reaches it, Phil at his heels. He's already been paid handsomely for healing Dream, even if it was only to the point of saving his life and not fully, but Techno will pay him a dozen times over if it's true. If Ranboo's awake again—

“Go easy,” Ponk tells him, gesturing for him to head inside. “Wilbur's with him right now, but he can't remember much.”

“Thank you,” Phil tells him, and Techno doesn't hear the rest because he's moved past them, into the private room with its extra long bed and the chairs that were almost occupied by at least one person. His usual seat is taken up by his brother's long limbs, but there's room at the end of the bed to sit because Ranboo is *awake*. He's awake, and he's sitting up, a tray with jello and broth resting beside him on the small side table.

“Ranboo,” he whispers, catching the end of the bed with one hand before he falls over.

“H-Hey Technoblade,” Ranboo says, smiling weakly. He's lost weight that he can't afford to lose, his already lean face gaunt now, but his eyes are bright and alive as they stay locked on his own fingers, twisting in the thin blanket that's covered him for weeks now.

“He woke up about an hour ago,” Wilbur tells him, exhaustion lining his face. Having the city's most wanted vigilante dropped on their doorstep hasn't done much for Wilbur's paranoia, and Techno knows he's in for a lecture.

But that's for later. For now, Wilbur pushes up out of the chair, gesturing for Techno to take his place, and runs his fingers through his hair. Techno sinks into it, unable to take his eyes off Ranboo even if he's courteous enough not to lock their gazes together—he knows it makes ender hybrids uncomfortable, but he can't stop looking.

They hadn't expected Ranboo to wake up, not really.

“I'm going to get something to eat and a quick nap.” Wilbur groans, stretching until his fingertips are brushing the ceiling. “I assume we have Syndicate business later this evening?”

“Yeah,” Techno says, finally tearing his attention off Ranboo and turning it towards his brother. “Could you text Niki for me? Phil's by the door, so he already knows.”

Wilbur gives him a look, not fooled in the slightest, but says “I’ll text her. *You* get Ranboo caught up to speed on what’s been going on, because this is going to be our first meeting of five since Hermes stabbed him.”

He doesn’t miss the tiny flinch through Ranboo’s frame, or the way Wilbur’s lips thin in silent anger. Ranboo’s been awake for an hour, and that’s long enough for Wilbur to ask questions and listen for any lies in the answers. The truth is damning enough, it seems.

“Go sleep, Wilbur.” He turns away from his brother, one ear open for the sound of the door swinging shut behind him, then looks at the food. “You should probably work on that. You’ve been on a feeding tube, but the sooner you’re eating on your own…”

“The sooner I’m out of here, yeah.” Ranboo sighs, running the pads of his thumbs over his recently clipped claws.

They sit there in silence for a few moments, Ranboo staring down at his own hands as Techno watches his face, the slight furrow in his brow, the way the slit pupils in his dual-colored eyes expand and contract as his focus shifts. He never thought he’d get this chance again. It had been sentiment, driving them to keep Ranboo alive with machines and Ponk’s regular checkups, not any true belief that he’d wake up.

Techno is unbelievably grateful that selfish sentiment won out, now.

He pulls his attention down to Ranboo’s hands, then clears his throat. “So, did Wilbur tell you anything about what’s been going on?”

“He said—” Ranboo swallows, hard, another tiny flinch running through him. “He said that Hermes has been missing since he ki—since he stabbed me. And that he’s been keeping an eye on my old team.”

“We all have.” In the little ways they could, at any rate. Wilbur’s civilian presence with Tommy was the easiest, but the Angel of Death had taken to patrolling in the skies when Team Sigma was out, and both he and Niki had crossed paths with the teens multiple times.

“That’s good. That’s good.” Ranboo nods, jerkily, then breathes in. “Tell me everything else.”

Assuming that Ranboo won’t care about his romantic woes, Techno tells him an edited version of what he’s been saying the last few weeks. That the city had mourned, but not for long, that they’d been looking into what Ranboo told him but hadn’t gotten far, and eventually, about Nightmare.

“As far as I can tell, he’s looking into the same thing you stumbled on,” Techno says as Ranboo finally starts eating the jello. “I think a friend of his died in the prison, and he’s been on a revenge kick since. He thinks Hermes stabbing you is part of it, which means maybe Schlatt’s got everyone but the Captain on his side.”

“That would make sense,” Ranboo says lowly, frowning down at his jello. The burn scars down his cheeks look more jagged than ever. “I thought he was better than that but—I guess I was wrong. I guess being the number one hero isn’t the same as being a good person.”

“We all thought he was better than that.” Techno ignores his embittered words to Dream earlier, the fury at Hermes that he lets distort every action the man took before killing Ranboo. The time for second chances and forgiveness is over. Hermes made sure of it.

“So now what?” Ranboo scrapes the last of the jello out of its cup, then looks over at him.

“Now, we make some decisions about him.”

A few hours later, Ranboo is cleared for light activity. *Very* light activity, Ponk had stressed, with reminders about physical therapy and the need to build those muscles back up again. Almost two months trapped in a bed, even with regular attempts to heal him and care taken to avoid bed sores as much as possible, has left Ranboo weak as a kitten. He can’t afford to push himself too hard now.

This also means that he can’t afford to go back to the Tower, where the next attempt to kill him might succeed. Once he’s feeling a little better, they’ll start figuring out a way to get his teammates into Syndicate headquarters without tipping them off, but that’s a lower priority right now.

Techno stands at his spot around the round table, hands braced against its waxed surface, wearing his human skin for now. Everyone here knows what he looks like under the mask, and there’s no point in withering the wood every time he wants to make a point.

(He’s terrified of brushing up against Ranboo and finishing what Hermes started. Everyone does him the courtesy of not pointing that out.)

“Nightmare has tapped out all his sources,” he says, trailing his eyes over the other four members of the Syndicate, focusing on Wilbur last. Phil will vote as he feels necessary, and he’s pretty sure Niki is on his side, but Wilbur’s going to be the sticking point. “I want to offer him the Syndicate’s aid on this.”

“What, not pulling your little boyfriend in as a member yet?” Wilbur’s brow lifts mockingly, and Techno has to remind himself—again—that he’s an adult now, and can’t launch across the table to break Wilbur’s nose. Even if he deserves it. Even if he *really* deserves it.

Phil’s lips quirk in a small smile, like he knows what Techno is thinking. He, like Wilbur and Niki, is in costume, wings on display and mask resting on his nose. “Now, now. Protesilaus wouldn’t be calling a meeting for that so early in the game. I give him a couple more months, at least.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Techno says dryly, turning his attention back to Wilbur. “Fact of the matter is, we know he works for Niki and we know he’s a vigilante. That’s it. I’m not offering him membership until we know more.”

“And whose fault is it that we don’t know more, hm?” Wilbur’s other brow joins its twin, an expression of false shock on his face. The urge to punch him is nigh-irresistible. “Give me three minutes alone with him and I’ll—”

“He’s immune to other people’s powers.” Techno lets those words sit, heavy and ominous, in the center of the room. Ranboo is frowning, touching his brow like he’s got a headache, and he wonders what memory that triggered.

The memory loss is to be expected, Ponk said. Ranboo’s going to struggle to remember things, even important things, for a while longer; they’re lucky that he *does* remember Hermes stabbing him, because otherwise he might not believe them. But it means that at times like this, when it’s clear that something is reminding him of a memory he can’t access, Techno has to wonder what it was.

He supposes that he’ll just have to keep wondering.

“Are you fucking serious?” Wilbur doesn’t look smug anymore. He looks worried. “Techno, you brought him into our *house*, and you’re telling me that you can’t guarantee that he won’t tell anyone—”

“I didn’t *know*, Wilbur. Not until today. Alright? But it means that, short of torturing him and hoping he doesn’t just tell us what we want to hear, we’ll have to take his word for it. Maybe you can still tell if he’s lying, I don’t know, but you can’t make him tell you anything.” He sighs, then looks to his right, where Niki is frowning down at the table, her tail swishing slightly and her fins flicking around her face.

“I trust him,” she says eventually, looking up again. “I’ve probably had the most contact with him as a civilian, and Nightmare’s a good person. And he’s a good person who doesn’t put himself first, even when he really should. I think, if it comes down to turning on us to save his own skin, he’ll take the fall.”

“That’s my assessment,” Techno agrees. “This investigation has been pretty thankless, but he’s been playing it close to his chest. If he’s willing to ask for help now, it’s not because he wants to exploit us. Probably the opposite.”

“Wait.” All of them look at Ranboo, keeping their eyes off his face as his tail flicks nervously. “Hang on. You know who he is as a civilian? How did that happen?”

“Techno swept him off his feet and offered him a job at Niki’s bakery,” Wilbur says, like a shithead.

“Techno swept him off his feet and I gave him a job when he asked,” Niki corrects him, flicking her fingers and summoning an orb of water threateningly.

“Techno did *not* sweep him off his feet, that is slander,” Techno says loudly, ignoring the way Phil starts to laugh softly. “Techno has done nothing at all wrong in this situation *and* we’re not dating.”

“Oh, what? C’mon mate, he’s practically throwing himself at you. Get on that before he realizes how awkward you are.”

“Thanks for your input, Phil,” he raises his voice again, trying to drown out the sound of Wilbur’s piercing laugh. “Can we just vote on whether or not we’re helping with his

investigation? *Please?*”

“That cleared up nothing,” Ranboo mutters, but he nods along with everyone else. Finally. Thank god.

“Everyone against offering Nightmare Syndicate resources, *not* membership, for his investigation into Schlatt?” Techno looks around the table, unsurprised when Wilbur’s hand shoots into the air. Niki’s remains firmly planted on the table, and Ranboo’s fingers twitch before stilling, but Phil’s hand lifts after only a second. “Phil?”

“Sorry, mate.” His father looks at him from under the brim of his bucket hat, feathered mask leaving his blue eyes in shadow. “Look, you like him, you trust him, that’s fair. But we don’t know shit all about him, and I’m not sure our help is going to do much good in the long run. I’m saying no.”

“Dad likes me better,” Wilbur adds helpfully, then yelps when Niki sends the orb of water directly into his face.

“Little shit,” Phil mutters. “That’s two against.”

“Alright. Everyone for offering Nightmare Syndicate resources, no membership, for the purposes of this investigation?” He raises his own hand, unsurprised when Niki raises hers as well. Ranboo’s fingers twitch, again, but his hands don’t lift, and he chews on his lower lip as he stares down at them. “Ranboo?”

“I don’t know,” Ranboo says slowly, “if I can make this choice honestly.”

“How do you mean?” Phil prompts gently, when no one else makes the move to ask.

“I mean—this is what I was looking into, we think. I died—I died for this. But I don’t know Nightmare, and all I can work off of is what you guys are telling me. I know Techno and Niki trust him, and that Wilbur doesn’t trust anybody—”

“Hey!”

“—but I don’t know *him*. And it’s not like I can ask to meet him, because Lethe is, *I’m* dead, and my involvement with the Syndicate has always been secret. If I meet him, then we’re exposing a much bigger secret than before.” Ranboo swallows, twisting his fingers together, then looks up and around the table with a quick flick of his eyes. “So. I’m a little stuck here.”

They all look at each other, Wilbur’s expression falling into something grim and unhappy, Niki’s mouth pinched at the edges. Ranboo has a point, and Techno doesn’t feel right pushing him on it. He *doesn’t* know Nightmare, he’s never met Dream, and it’s asking a lot for him to go from hospital bed to meeting.

“Alright,” Techno says, resigning himself to doing a lot of extra legwork in the foreseeable future, “a draw isn’t a majority and something like this needs a majority, so—”

“I’m revising my vote,” Wilbur says, cutting him off.

Techno stares at him, disbelieving, before saying, “Heh?”

“I’m revising my vote.” Wilbur’s eyes flick to Ranboo, to Niki, to Phil. His hair is hanging sopping wet over one cheek, his masquerade mask framing the hard look in his eyes, and whatever he sees in their faces makes his jaw firm. “I’m voting yes to give him Syndicate resources.”

“On what condition?” Techno asks warily, because Wilbur’s quicksilver mind is a dangerous place. Especially when he’s changing his decision on the fly like this.

“You tell us everything that he knows, everything that he’s told you, and at some point in the future—doesn’t have to be immediately—you leave me alone in a room with him for half an hour. I want to pick his brain, and I don’t want you hovering over him like an overprotective badger the whole time.” Wilbur’s red eyes meet his, and Techno swallows.

He’ll never tell anyone, but he picked the eyes on this disguise to match his brother. His twin in everything but blood. Because, in the end, they have each other’s backs, no matter what.

“I can agree to that,” he says. “Does that work for everyone else?”

Ranboo and Niki both nod. Phil shrugs and pushes back from the table, wings mantling for a moment before settling again. “Will you need me for this part? I haven’t been running any investigations myself, and most of my contacts answer to Niki now. ‘Cause if you don’t need me, I’m off to patrol.”

“Anything that might be relevant, I’ll tell you later,” Techno says, nodding for him to go. On the way out, Phil grips his shoulder, a tight squeeze that’s better than a hug even if it’s brief. Then he’s gone, and everyone’s eyes are on Techno again.

Alright. Time to repeat everything Dream had told him upstairs, with his own observations to boot.

“How’d it go?” Dream asks when he gets back to the bedroom. His eyes are bright with awareness, not fever, and he doesn’t sound as weak as he had on first waking. There’s a book open in his lap, and Techno doesn’t have to glance at his shelf to know it’s the *Art of War*.

“We’ve got Syndicate resources to work with, and Orpheus is going to see if any of his contacts have heard anything. Nemesis was already halfway on this project, looking into police records for me, so she didn’t have anything new to add.” He sits on the edge of the bed, resting a hand on one of Dream’s bare legs and relishing in the fact that he *can*.

There isn’t the knife edge of fear cutting through him, none of the paranoia that always comes with every brush of his skin against someone else’s. The emerald in his ear cuts his powers off, leaves him looking human, but it doesn’t *matter*, because Dream is immune. To everyone’s powers, but also to him, specifically.

He’s going to have to work a lot harder to kill Dream if it comes to that, and it’s the most wonderful thing that’s ever happened to him.

“How long is that going to take? I’ve got my hoodie soaking in the tub but, uh, I’m not sure how salvageable it is.” Dream makes a face, rubbing a hand over the wound in his side. “And, much as I like wearing your clothes, I kind of... want my own clothes back.”

Techno snorts, smoothing his palm over the freckles on Dream’s shin, then pulls his hand away. “If you feel up to walking, you can take me to that house you keep insisting you have. We’ll get your things and bring them back here.”

“That’s... not a bad idea, actually. I can give you the prison blueprints too, and maybe you’ll see something on my investigation map that I missed.” Dream sets the book to the side, pulling out from under Techno’s hand as he swings his legs over the side of the bed. He’s moving smoothly, only the slight pinch of pain at the corners of his eyes betraying him.

Techno thinks about the scar on his arm, the lie about being at the bank, the times Dream’s shown up to work with injuries that can’t be waved off, and wonders just how high his pain tolerance is. It must have been a fucked up life that led Dream to this place, working with villains to bring down the top heroes in the Federation.

“You know,” he says, watching as Dream walks over to his vigilante clothes and digs out the cargo pants, “you never told me who you lost. Who Schlatt killed, that made you start looking into this.”

Dream stops. Stops moving, stops breathing, just stops. When he does start moving again, his voice is low and hoarse as he says, “My brother. My little brother. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time and I—I can’t forgive Schlatt for killing him.”

“I’m sorry,” Techno tells him.

Dream buckles the pants at his hips, bouncing a few times before going looking for his shoes. He hasn’t bothered to change out of the sweater, which looks out of place against his black pants, too pink and too soft for how dangerous Dream is. “It is what it is. I’m going to bring Schlatt down if it’s the last thing I do. Ready to go?”

He stands, grabbing a duffle bag out from his closet, then gestures for Dream to go ahead of him. “Lead the way. We’ve never been able to figure out where you’re staying at night.”

“That was intentional.” Dream gives him a lopsided grin, shoving his hands in his pockets as he heads for the elevator. The urge to reach out and pull him close makes Techno’s fingers itch, but he keeps his hands to himself as they descend to the front lobby, and when they step outside, he watches Dream bounce on his toes (so like Nightmare, how had he missed that for so long?) before turning left.

The sky is orange and red, purple chasing after both of them and leaving the undersides of the clouds pink. Sixth district’s nightlife is starting up, the neon signs and billboards lighting up with a steady glow as the streetlights flicker from neglect. They pass by the bakery, dark and locked tight, then head further. Dream walks steadily, hands in his pockets the whole time, shoulders relaxed as he heads unerringly deeper into the district.

There are no parking garages or dead end alleyways this time, no detours for bus stop benches or moments curled up in the doorways of shops. Rather than lead him on a wild goose chase all over the district, Dream comes to a stop in an alleyway about fifteen minutes from the bakery, looking around with a frown.

“There’s usually a dumpster around here,” he says, and Techno sighs. “I don’t—I’m not living in the dumpster, Techno, don’t look at me like that. I just don’t know if you can make the jump without it.”

“What jump?” Techno asks, before looking up and seeing the ladder of a fire escape above his head. It’s on the second story and locked in place. “Oh.”

“Maybe I can—” Dream pulls his hands free, turning to walk further down the alley, and Techno clears his throat.

“I can boost you up there, then jump.” He grins at the look Dream gives him. “I’ll make the jump, Dream. C’mon.”

“If you fall flat on your face, I’m taking a picture for blackmail,” Dream mutters, but he comes back to Techno and fits his shoe into his cupped palms without protest. It’s like they’ve done the move a hundred times before, Techno hefting him up and Dream launching until he can grab the rungs of the ladder and climb—they just *fit* together, in ways that steal Techno’s breath away.

“Move, greenie,” he says, laughing at the sputtering from above. A running step, kicking off the wall, and a dip into his wither power to float *just* enough, and he’s grabbing the bottom rung. Dream reaches down to help him climb the rest of the way, only wincing once at the pull against his ribs.

“Hope you’re ready to climb,” is what Dream says instead of telling Techno how cool his jump was. From the way his eyes flick to Techno’s face, just once, it’s clear he does it on purpose.

“Lead the way,” Techno tells him, rather than giving him the satisfaction of knowing that it annoys him.

They climb. Dream moves silently and Techno moves as quietly as he can, their shoes scuffing against the worn red metal, the railings creaking under their grips. The building is almost twenty stories tall—not one of the tallest in the sixth district, not by a long shot, but not short either. The higher they get, the more neon paints their skin in rainbow hues, the sun’s last glow vanishing beyond the mass of buildings between them and the horizon. Dream is beautiful like this, with his chin-length hair gleaming pink, blue, green, gold, the pink sweater he stole from Techno’s closet colored the same tones as his warm, freckled skin.

Techno resolves to shove Dream in one of his button-ups in the future. Not that he minds having Wilbur’s sweaters in his closet, but he wants to see Dream in *his* clothes and no one else’s.

“Here we are,” Dream says at the top floor, just when Techno was beginning to wonder if they’d be jumping from rooftop to rooftop. Before he can ask, Dream cranks the window open, sliding into the dark apartment and gesturing for Techno to follow.

It’s. Not great.

Dream flicks the lights on and they flicker for a second before steadying, but Techno wishes that he hadn’t. Under the cold glow of neon, the details had been easy to miss, but the bulbs in here are warm and show entirely too much. Mold on the ceiling, where water stains and mildew vie for supremacy. Cracks in the drywall, cracks in the vinyl flooring, parts of the floor peeling up and revealing more mold. His appliances are scuffed, the laminate on his kitchen counters peeling as well, and he’s pretty sure the faucets are rusty. It’s all one room, which means he can see everything at a glance.

There are clothes stacked near the locked front door, one pile neatly folded and the other haphazardly shoved in a trashbag with a roll of quarters on top of it. The wall opposite the window is covered, floor to ceiling, in printouts that make up a map of Esemipi, all its districts marked out and three different colors circled and drawn between various locations. Stacks of paper sit below it, including a folder from the City Hall archives wrapped in red thread. A neat stack of smiling masks sits off to the side, all of them copies of the one Nightmare wears.

It’s on his third pass of the room that Techno finally spots the bed. A blanket on the floor, a second blanket kicked up at the foot of it, a charging cable running up to the pillow and—that’s not a pillow. That’s a black hoodie bundled up in the facsimile of a pillow.

He is no longer relieved to find out that Dream has a place to stay. This place is *shit*.

“What the hell, Dream,” he says, blankly.

“Sorry, the system isn’t that intuitive I guess,” Dream says, staring at his map instead of his *pathetic blankets on the floor*. “Green is my contacts and informants, along with places that have yielded information for me. Blue is Syndicate points of interest. Red’s my points of investigation for Schlatt—that’s anything that showed up as an oddity, and anything that I can tie directly back to him. Here, look, I can make you a key—”

“The map is not what I was talking about,” Techno finally manages to say, tearing his eyes away from the nest in the corner and turning towards Dream. “You live like this?”

Dream stares at him, brow furrowed in genuine confusion, lip caught between his teeth. After a moment, he cautiously offers, “It’s not that bad?”

“Please tell me you are not paying rent on this place.” If he is, the Syndicate is about to acquire a second apartment building, because like hell is Techno letting him keep living like this. Dream doesn’t even have a key to the front door.

“What? No. Of course I’m not paying for this, I’m squatting.” With a roll of his eyes, Dream turns back to his map. “I probably don’t have all the Syndicate markers right, but that was

more so I could keep track of you than anything else, so they don't matter. The important ones are the red threads."

"That is so not—Okay." Techno sighs, dropping his bag on the floor and stepping closer to actually examine the map this time. Within seconds, his eyebrows are lifting, and he reaches for his phone to take pictures. Because from how Dream was talking, he's been assuming that the threads tying Schlatt to this business were tenuous at best, hunches and assumptions instead of facts.

What Dream has here is far more than assumptions. He has names, dates, places, and when Techno checks the references on a sticky note against the stack of papers underneath it, he finds signatures and damning amounts of official stamps on all of it. The prison blueprints are useful for the Syndicate's goals, but Dream's built up a case against Schlatt that would be an absolute bombshell if released at the right time, in the right place, to the right people.

"It's not enough," Dream says as Techno finishes copying the map and starts collecting the papers into stacks that are easier to carry. All of this is going straight to their offices in the basement of the Syndicate building. "If I had a smoking gun, like the book, I might be able to bring this to the Captain for an official investigation, but..."

"You're thinking like a hero again," Techno says, looking up. "This might not be enough for a prosecutor to ask for a warrant, and it might not be enough for the Captain to start an investigation, but this is *more* than enough for what you want."

Dream blinks, dropping into a crouch next to him. "What do you mean?"

"What do you want to happen to Schlatt?" he asks, setting his stack of papers down and reaching for Dream's hand.

"I want him ruined. I want everyone to know what he's done, so he can't hide from it. I want his reputation so fucking tarnished that when I kill him, no one mourns." Dream is breathing hard at the end of it, staring at Techno's hand in his as anger makes him tremble. "I want him dead, Technoblade. I want him dead."

"Well, this?" He jerks his thumb towards the wall. "This is more than enough to get that. We give all this information to Orpheus and he'll ruin Schlatt's entire image with it. We get that second book and we have leverage over him. And once we have leverage, we can get you into the Tower to kill him."

"You mean that." Dream swallows, eyes finally lifting to meet Techno's own. Like the last time, the intensity blows him away, makes him tense as his muscles tighten like he's about to match a foe blow for blow.

"I mean that," Techno promises him, not looking away even though the green threatens to drown him. "You did your part, Dream. Let us do ours."

Dream's breath rasps in his chest, a flush crawling over his cheeks. Then, fast enough that it drives a startled noise out of Techno's throat, he jerks them both to the floor and pulls Techno close, one hand still tangled in Techno's own while the other fists in the front of his shirt. For

a second, the old fear wells up, the terror of killing someone he likes—and then Dream’s lips are on his and it doesn’t matter anymore.

Nothing matters anymore, not the investigation, not the shitty apartment falling apart around them, not the suspicion waiting for them back home or the secrets Techno has yet to tell him. All that matters is Dream’s body under his, Dream’s lips parting as Techno pushes closer, Dream’s skin warm under his fingers as Techno shoves his free hand under the sweater.

“We’ll get him,” Techno murmurs into Dream’s neck as a leg hooks over his hip. And then neither of them say anything else.

Chapter End Notes

Hermes/Nightmare - Dream

Protesilaus - Techno

Zephyrus - Philza

Nemesis - Niki

Lethe - Ranboo

Orpheus - Wilbur

Everyone: I can't wait for Dream and Ranboo to meet again

Me, the author, knowing that it's going to happen the most painful way possible: Oh,

You Really Really Can

fear & loathing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When they return to Techno's home—Dream is still smarting a little about the obvious horror on Techno's face when he first stepped into the apartment, even if that horror hadn't mattered much ten minutes later—Wilbur is waiting for them. Rather, *Orpheus* is waiting for them, tapping his foot impatiently as they exit the elevator, his mask slightly askew.

"You were supposed to be *here*," he says, glaring at Dream for a second before turning his ire on Techno. "I've been waiting for almost an hour."

"We were busy," Techno says, straight-faced, which is pretty impressive considering how hard he'd blushed over a little flirting. Dream would love to crack his head open and examine his brain like an insect under a magnifying glass, just... not in front of his brother.

"Of course you were," Orpheus mutters. "Look, there's an auction going down in Las Nevadas tomorrow night. I've gotten you invitations, which is *not* easy on short notice, but you're going to need to dress the part."

"Why are we going to an auction?" Dream asks, glancing at the bag over Techno's shoulder that holds all his information on Schlatt. He'd mentioned giving it to Orpheus, but it makes Dream itch, handing over the hard copies of everything. Maybe he can convince Techno to let him photocopy what he's handing to Orpheus instead. Just so that he knows the original evidence is safe.

"You're looking for a book, one half of a matched set, with ties to either religious organizations or cults, right?"

Dream blinks. *Is* he? He hadn't made the leap to that last bit, just knows that whatever Schlatt is up to, it's probably not a first edition of *Pride & Prejudice* that he's using. He looks at Techno, confused, but Techno is just frowning thoughtfully.

"You think you found something," Techno says.

"Correction: I *know* I found something. It might not be the same thing you're looking for, but Joker has... acquired a book that matches those criteria, that the Tower has already expressed interest in purchasing outside of the auction." Orpheus favors them both with a smug little smile. "You're welcome, by the way."

"And the reason why we have to get it and not you, is...?" Techno asks, while Dream is still reeling from how *easy* this is. He's been working alone for so long that he's forgotten what it's like to have a team, a support staff of any kind, and the revelation is punching him in the gut.

“Because I’m not burning one of my favors from Joker on your book. If it’s the one you’re looking for, I want *you* two to go and explain that to him.” He hesitates, then adds, “Also, he wants to meet Nightmare. The Queen told me the same time he told me about the book, so I think that your odds will be better if Dream’s the one asking.”

“We’ll do it,” Dream says, before Techno can keep complaining. “I can find something to fit the dress code, whatever that is. But while we’re going, can you look at something for me?”

“I’m not your errand boy,” Orpheus says, scowling at him. Techno scowls back.

“I know, I know.” Dream unzips the bag, pulling out the stacks of evidence. “But Techno thinks you can do more with this than I can, and if we want to bring Schlatt down, I’ll take whatever help I can get. Please.”

Still scowling, Orpheus takes the papers, flipping through the first few. Slowly, the scowl vanishes, replaced by a tiny frown that’s more thoughtful than it is angry. Like Techno, he seems to think Dream has a lot more there than he originally thought. “This is what you’ve been working on?”

“Part of it. Techno took pictures of my map, that’s what the sticky notes correspond to. I was using it to look for a smoking gun, but if you can use it…” Dream shrugs.

“Oh, yes, I can use this. Do you have anything else in there that I’ll need?” He looks at Techno as he asks it, but both of them shake their heads. Dream’s whole life fits in one duffel bag, but it’s slightly more of a life than he’d carried the first time he ran. “Alright. I’m going to go get this sorted, and then I’m taking a goddamn *nap*. Techno, you know the dress code. Make sure he fits it.”

“Noted,” Techno mutters, stepping out of the way as Orpheus punches the button to summon the elevator.

“Oh, and, Techno?” Orpheus turns as the doors open, giving them both an unfavorable look. “If you’re going to keep putting Dream in my sweaters, *please* do me the favor of not fucking him in them.”

He sleeps in Techno’s bed, which is also too soft. His chest *hurts* though, so the softness is appreciated, especially once Techno shoves a cup of water and a pair of pills into his hand and waits for him to swallow both down. The painkillers numb him enough that he’s able to relax into the arms curled around his waist, and Techno’s heartbeat is the music he falls asleep to.

Grievous chest wounds aren’t enough to keep him down past dawn, though. Dream worms his way free of Techno’s grip sometime around seven, checking his phone on habit. There’s only one message, from Niki, telling him that he’s got the day off to find a suit for the auction tonight. He doesn’t know why he expected more than that.

(It’s George, again, leaving messages on his phone at six in the morning, long after he’s supposed to be asleep. Dream replies, because he knows just how bad George’s sleep

schedule is, and laughs to himself when he gets a reply immediately.

“You’re so stupid,” George will tell him that afternoon, when both of them are bleary-eyed and grumpy from lack of sleep, but in the soft light of dawn, Dream texts with him instead of sleeping.)

Phil is in the kitchen once more, leaning against the counter with a cup of tea as he gazes outside. His attention shifts to Dream briefly when he passes by to pour a cup for himself, but it returns to the view almost immediately. It’s a gorgeous view. Dream takes a moment to admire it himself, fighting down the pang in his heart that makes him think of his old apartment in the Tower.

“So. Nightmare, huh.” Phil’s voice is mild, bland. Dream remembers the last time they had a talk in the kitchen and has to bite back a sigh.

“In my defense, I didn’t pick the name,” he says, because he feels like that’s a joke that will get old *fast* otherwise. “I don’t know why people started calling me that.”

“It’s your mask, mate,” Phil says, sipping at his tea. “Fuckin’ horrific.”

“People keep saying that, but I feel like you’d all appreciate how nice it is if you saw my first couple attempts.” Dream sits there, basking in the silence for a few moments longer, before asking, “Are you going to give me the shovel talk again?”

“Do I need to?” The weight of Phil’s eyes on him makes him want to bristle, but he shoves those instincts down. Even if being injured makes him want to lash out. Even if the cracked ribs and the gauze on his side remind him of how dangerous it is to be vulnerable.

“I mean, I didn’t think you needed to do it the first time. I’m not...” He hesitates. He can’t promise not to hurt Techno, because that would be the same as promising to never die, and Dream *can’t* make that promise. Not if he’s going to see this through. “I don’t want to hurt him. I like him a lot.”

That blue gaze doesn’t waver. Dream wants to ask what Phil’s problem with him is, if he remembers Dream, if he ever thought about the little ender hybrid who’d cowered under his wing from the rain once. Wants to ask him if he hates Hermes as much as Techno does, or if he still thinks of him fondly.

He doesn’t ask. The tea is warm in his hands and Techno is sleeping down the hall and, for the moment, things are going his way. Dream might not have the best sense of self-preservation, but he’s not going to ruin this for himself either.

“Have you changed those bandages yet?” Phil asks, instead of addressing Dream’s previous points.

No one in this family can stay on subject. Dream makes a face, but admits, “No, I haven’t.”

“Get to the couch and pull that sweater off, I’ll get some new ones.” Just like that, Phil dismisses him. With a sigh, Dream goes to follow orders, carrying his tea out into the living

room with him. At least he still gets to admire the view from the couch, sitting with his legs crossed and the sweater in his lap.

He glances down once, just to see the mess of purple and red bruising wrapped around his chest, the gauze on his side already soaked through with blood. When he brushes his fingers over his back, he can feel smaller squares taped over the holes the Warden's trident left behind, but those must not be big enough to need more than that. If he pulled the disguise off, he's pretty sure things would look much, much worse.

The disguise stays on, his ring warm around his little finger. A moment later, Phil returns, setting gauze, wraps, and tape down on the couch next to Dream's leg. He's got a pair of scissors that Dream can't see, only feel as the cool blade slides up under the wraps on his chest and begins to cut.

"Wilbur's mad at you, you know," Phil says. His hands are steady with the scissors, the blades never nicking Dream's skin. It takes a surprising amount of nerve to let the Angel of Death hold a weapon to his back.

"When is Wilbur *not* mad at me," Dream mutters, controlling his breathing as best he can. "I'm pretty sure he's still holding a grudge over me walking into the bakery while he was flirting with Niki."

Behind him, Phil chuckles, a low sound that reminds him of Zephyrus's hand in his hair when he was young. "True. I think this time, he's mad because you were right about something, and he was wrong."

"Goody for me. If I ask really nicely, will you stop him from trying to shank me in my sleep?"

This time, Phil laughs out loud, the scissors cutting the last bit of cotton before pulling away. It's easier to breathe without cool metal against his bruises. "He won't do that. Might prank you, because he's a little shit, but he won't kill you."

"That's an awfully confident claim for a guy who isn't at risk of being shanked," Dream points out, before making a noise of surprise and jerking when the gauze is pulled off his wound. Not just because it hurts, but because it *tickles*, and it feels like a string being pulled under his skin.

"Oops," Phil says mildly, putting pressure back on the hole in his side immediately. "Think that scab was load-bearing, mate. Let me get more gauze, you just hold this there and keep pressure on it."

"Oh, gross," Dream mutters, holding the now damp pad of gauze against his side. He can feel blood welling up, soaking into it further and warming it under his fingers. It's oddly reassuring, because he's been feeling like he lost his mind, going from dying under the Warden's trident to walking around in just a day.

"Hang on, hang on. On the count of three, go ahead and pull your hand away. One, two—"

He pulls his hand, and the gauze he was holding, off the wound on three. Phil replaces it immediately with a thicker pad, one that seems to absorb the blood better. Keeping it there with one hand, he grabs the bloody mess out of Dream's hand with the other.

"Hold that." His hand disappears from Dream's side once Dream is holding the pad. There's the sticky sound of bandages being unwrapped, and then Phil starts running the roll around his stomach, wrapping it around and around again as Dream holds his breath and flexes his muscles against the restriction. "There we go, no harm no foul."

"Bet Techno would've hated it if I bled out on your couch." As jokes go, it's pretty weak, but Phil snorts anyways.

"It's not that big a hole in your side." His fingers are deft as they tape the bandages around his middle before finding the ones taped in place over the holes in his back. "Just popped a stitch or two is all. These look much better already though, so I'm gonna put fewer layers and give 'em some room to breathe."

"I'll make sure to tell him that," Dream says with a roll of his eyes, inhaling as deep as he can before his cracked ribs protest. "You know, when I'm *dying*."

"Don't be such a baby." Phil gives his arm a pat once he's done, grabbing his medical gear and hefting it back up. "You've already died on him once, you know."

"What?" Even though it hurts, Dream twists around to stare at him. Phil's packing the unused bandages up, clicking his first aid kit shut and pushing it to the side. When he looks back up, the faint amusement in his face is gone.

"As Nightmare. You grabbed his arm and he spent a week thinking he'd killed you." His eyes soften at whatever he sees in Dream's face at that, and his touch is more gentle this time when he reaches over to squeeze Dream's shoulder. "Just remember that. He won't tell you about it, but Techno's always been afraid of killing someone he loves by accident. Try not to put him in that situation again."

"Didn't mean to do it the first time," Dream says, numb with horror. No wonder Protesilaus had been so odd on seeing him again. It must have been like having a ghost step onto that rooftop with him.

He thinks about what it would be like, if Ranboo walked through the door right now like nothing had happened, and he feels sick.

Phil leaves with the first aid kit in tow. After trying to convince himself that he should eat something, Dream grabs the sweater and heads back to Techno's room, dropping it in the hamper on his way back to the bed. The emerald dangling from Techno's ear casts green shadows on his cheek, and his hair spills out in a sheet across his shoulders, his back, past his waist now that it's undone. When Dream runs his fingers through the pink strands, they're soft as silk.

He sits on the edge of the bed, then swings himself under the covers. Despite his attempts to be stealthy, Techno grunts and opens his eyes, blinking in confusion as Dream lifts his arm

and wiggles underneath it.

“Dream?” he mumbles, splaying his hand over Dream’s injured ribs, warm and comforting.

“Go back to sleep,” Dream tells him, pulling the blankets up over them both. “I won’t leave again.”

They’re on too tight of a deadline for him to get a proper fitted suit. A quick trip to the second district and a place that sells off the rack with adjustments is the best they can manage, Dream getting poked with pins as Techno negotiates the price for getting it done before eight that night.

The Syndicate has a lot of money. The part of Dream that lived on the streets for years is a little offended by that, but he knows the Federation pays well—it’s just that Zephyrus was smart enough to pull all his money out and invest it under a new name, whereas Dream was cut off long before he thought to visit a bank. In his defense, he had other stuff on his mind at the time.

Night, *true* night, falls before they make their way to seventh district. Las Nevadas isn’t a single place so much as it is a concept: the casino that Joker owns, yes, but also the streets on either side of it and extending further into the district and out into the scrubland at the edge of the city, a border that is sharply defined but invisible to anyone without eyes to see it. The lights turn red, gold, white out here, leaving the streets gilded and the crowds energized. There are advertisements, *oh* are there advertisements, but the main show is the displays that flicker, every so often, with the masked faces of the Las Nevadas Royal Flush.

Techno takes him straight to the main casino, bypassing the strip clubs and restaurants that boast Las Nevadas’s protection. Seventh is a part of the city that heroes rarely patrol, because Joker doesn’t take kindly to their meddling and the other criminals know better than to piss off the best game in town. Dream has never been to the casino, even though he knows the Federation sometimes brokers deals; that had always been Sapnap’s job, because Schlatt is barred from the premises and they assumed that went for Hermes and the Captain as well.

“How often do you come here?” he asks, sticking close to Techno’s side. Both of them are wearing masks, but Techno’s still wearing his human disguise. In a crowd like this one, unleashing his wither heritage would be asking for a slaughter.

The boar skull looks odd over pink hair, strangely heavy without the soulfire dancing around it. It’s made of netherite, something Dream was shocked to discover when Techno let him inspect it a few hours ago. He can’t imagine walking around with *netherite* on his head for hours at a time.

“Never, if I can help it,” Techno says, the voice changer in the skull distorting his speech just enough that he sounds like Protesilaus instead.

Which he is, right now. Dream drags his brain back into gear, trying to force himself to be professional. It’s never been this difficult, not even with Sapnap and George, but there’s some

part of him that can't help but look at Techno—at Protesilaus—and all his sense goes out the window.

Dream's suit is simple, black, and cut to flatter his waist. Techno's suit is anything *but* simple, his jacket a gaudy thing of white silk and sewn-in diamonds, gold thread embroidering the shoulders and sleeves. There's more gold in his vest, and his boots are gilded netherite extending up to his thighs, leaving the barest hint of skin-tight white silk covering his legs. It's a suit that draws attention, especially with the gold chains woven in Techno's braid and hanging from his mask.

Next to him, Dream is invisible, even with his smiling mask.

"Not a big fan of gambling?" Dream's eyes flick to the top of the casino, where the Jack sits dressed in scarlet, a sniper rifle at his side and a coin flipping off his thumb. His fox ears flick and twist, and there's a wire running up to one of them. First layer of security.

"Not a big fan of Joker," Techno says, muscle in his jaw tightening. "I gave him the blind eye, a year or two back, and we've been rocky ever since. Weren't exactly on good terms beforehand."

"So... Orpheus sent you with me, why, again?" Not that Dream is complaining, when he gets to see Techno all dolled up, but this seems like a plan doomed to fail.

"He's a dick." With that, Techno leads him into the casino proper, and Dream has to take a moment to orient himself again.

The first thing he notices is the *noise*. Not just the crowd, which picks them up and carries them along whether or not Dream wants them to, but the ringing of slot machines, the enthusiastic calls from barkers hanging around the edges of the casino floor, the raucous laughter from the card tables and the rattling whirl of the roulette tables. Almost everyone around them has a drink in hand, and there's bars dotting the floor as far as the eye can see. A second floor stretches over the main one, held up by delicate brass bridges and gorgeous gilded staircases, velvet ropes blocking off entrance. The VIP section, where the real high-stakes gambling happens.

The second thing he notices is just *how much* gold there is. Or at least, the appearance of it. Brass fixtures, gilding on the marble columns, gold threading through the massive marble slabs that make up the floor underneath plush red carpeting. Gold threading in the velvet hanging on the walls, woven through scarlet and indigo and violet fabric in a myriad of designs. Gold glinting on the buttons of the guards that weave through the casino crowd, in the rings the waitresses wear as they weave between patrons with glasses on their trays, on the watches the dealers all check every five minutes.

It's dizzying. It's *excessive*, and Dream is overwhelmed within seconds, long before he notices the screens hung high above everything playing videos on repeat of various TV spots that Joker and his Royal Flush have been on.

They're not heroes or villains. Las Nevadas exists outside of limited binaries like that, its own beast that disregards the petty disputes between the Federation and the people they hunt.

He supposes it's not a surprise that the Syndicate is so familiar with them, but it still amazes him that Techno is able to tolerate this crush of people in a too-bright environment.

Dream glances to the side, seeing how tight Techno's jaw is, and revises his assessment a little.

"This way," Techno says, grabbing his arm and pulling him against the flow of the crowd. Dream goes with him, ignoring the affronted looks they get that turn to shock at the sight of Protesilaus and Nightmare in Las Nevadas. He's sure that they're already being posted across social media but, ironically, Las Nevadas is the safest place for that to happen. Joker takes his neutral status very seriously, and with the auction on tonight, Dream is sure that the Jack has orders to shoot first, ask questions later.

He can't see what Techno is leading him towards, but he trusts the man knows where he's going. Dream tracks where they've been instead, memorizing the route out in case they need to beat a hasty retreat. And he's grateful for that when Techno comes to a stop in front of a solid gold door manned by a man in emerald with a golden mask on his face. The Queen.

"We need to talk to Joker," Techno says, like he's certain they'll get in. Orpheus had warned them that they might not, that Joker might force them to attend the auction itself in a fit of pique, but it's worth it to try the easy route first.

"We've been expecting you, Technoblade from Esempi and Dream from the End," the Queen says cheerfully, opening the door up without hesitation. "I can lead you to Joker's office with my very human legs right now!"

"That's... great. Thanks." Techno sounds weary, like he's done this before, but Dream is frozen in place because—they're wearing masks. They can't be identified. And what the *fuck* did he mean by 'the End'?

"Protesilaus," he hisses as they step into a mercifully quiet hall, its walls paneled in plush white silk and gold engravings, "what the fuck was *that*?"

"Don't question it," Techno says, his attention fixed on the Queen's retreating back. "He does it to everyone. The only reason we're wearing masks is for the crowd—Joker knows who you are long before you step into his office."

But he called me *Dream*, he wants to say and doesn't. If it's just a matter of piecing together who he was, then surely, surely the Queen would have said Hermes, wouldn't he?

He's unsettled and unhappy. He's significantly more unsettled and unhappy when he and Techno are led to an office at the end of the hall and the Ace and the King are waiting there, clad in gold and purple suits respectively. Like the Queen, their masks are gold, though the Ace has emeralds embedded where his eyes ought to be. It's an unnerving sight.

Behind the desk sits the Joker; unlike his Royal Flush, he's wearing nothing more than a white shirt and suspenders, the half-mask that covers one side of his face extending out enough to wrap around his good eye. If what Techno said earlier is true, the solid gold half is covering his blind side. The eye Dream can see is dark and calculating, and Joker's voice is

level when he says, “You all can go. I’m sure we won’t have a repeat of last time, will we, Blood God?”

“Not unless you’re plannin’ on trying to kill me again,” Techno drawls, standing at ease despite the fact that he doesn’t have a weapon but the King has, like, five of them. Dream keeps a wary eye on all three members of the Royal Flush until the door clicks shut behind them, then turns his attention back to the person ruling them with a silk-gloved hand.

He’s tiny, Dream realizes as he takes a step closer to the desk, putting himself in front of Techno. Somehow he hadn’t expected the most powerful man in Las Nevadas to be *small*.

“Joker,” he says, trying to feel out how formal he should be, “Orpheus told us that you wanted to talk to me.”

The half of his face visible stretches into a wide grin, and Joker pushes up from his desk. “Why *yes*, actually, I did. You’re an interesting guy, Nightmare. You show up out of nowhere, you start running around the city like you own the place, you play games on *my* turf... It makes me wonder where you got the idea that you have any *right*.”

“Okay, well, in my defense, I was *well* outside of Las Nevadas when I was investigating stuff in seventh,” Dream points out, feeling more than hearing Techno’s sigh behind him. “I mean, I wasn’t, like, *trying* to step on toes or anything but—”

“And what makes you think,” Joker says, soft and deadly, “that you have any right to dictate the borders of *my* town?”

“Like, legally, or morally?” Dream asks without thinking. He wants to smack himself in the face the minute the words are out of his mouth, but he doesn’t dare look back to see what expression Techno is making under his mask. The silence is enough to tell him that this is *his* mess to wade his way out of, and he can’t call for a lifeline either.

Joker stares at him. More grateful than ever that he painted the eyes on his mask lower than his actual ones, Dream stares back.

“You think this is funny, Nightmare?” Joker asks eventually. “You think this is a fucking game?”

“No, but I think you’re jerking my chain because you don’t have anything else to throw at me,” Dream says, shoving his hands into his pockets and not caring that it messes up the clean line of his suit. “Look. I’m sorry I did crime fighting on your turf, even though I didn’t, because I know better than to do that in seventh. But that’s kind of not the reason why we’re here.”

“Oh really? And what *is* the reason you’re here, Nightmare? Because you bought tickets to the auction, but *somehow*, I get the feeling you aren’t here to buy.” Joker’s eye flicks to Techno, then back to him. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“I’m willing to buy.” His hands fist in his pockets. He’s been squirreling away as much money from his paychecks as he can, just in case, but he’ll probably have to ask Techno for a

loan if it comes down to that.

“Uh-huh. And what is it, *exactly*, that you’re looking to buy? Information? A shiny new weapon? A little bit of clout, so you can tell people that you’ve been to Las Nevadas and they start taking Nightmare seriously?”

“A book.” His fists clench tighter. “A very important book. One half of a set, devoted to an old cultist god called XD. It’s supposed to go up to auction tonight, but if we can arrange something first...”

Joker’s expression goes blank and his heart drops into his gut. Behind him, he can feel Techno shift to a more battle ready stance, and it’s all he can do to avoid bouncing on his toes. He knows neither of them will land a hit on Joker, his luck is too good, but they might be able to fight their way out with minimal casualties. Maybe.

“A book,” Joker repeats, voice flat.

“We’re willin’ to pay quite a lot for it,” Techno says, the first thing he’s said since they were shown into the office. The implicit Syndicate support doesn’t make Joker relax; if anything, he looks more wary than ever.

“*Unfortunately*, I can’t sell it to you. You see, me and my Federation contact, we’re *close*,” and here Joker makes a crude gesture which implies a lot of things about how close they are, “so when they come asking for something specific and they’ve got the cash to pay, I’m usually willing to broker a deal. You’re too late, Nightmare.”

There is... a lot to unpack there. For one, Sapnap hadn’t ever said *shit* about fucking the Joker, and Dream can’t shake it out of him anymore. For another, they were so close to having their leverage and now it’s slipping out from his fingers, because he knows that the second Schlatt gets his hands on that book, it’s all over.

“Can you get it back?” he asks, not caring if he sounds desperate. “Look, if anyone else, *literally* anyone else had bought it, fine, but that book cannot get back to the Tower.”

Joker laughs, harsh and mirthless. “What, and go back on my word? What fucking reason would I—”

“Schlatt’s stealing people’s powers,” Dream interrupts, truly desperate now. “It’s a flawed process with just one book, but now he’s going to have the other one. He gets both of those books, it’s just a matter of time before they show up at Las Nevadas and take it by force so he can take *you*.”

The room goes silent. Joker’s eye flicks to Techno again, a silent question that Dream doesn’t dare turn around to see the answer to. Whatever he sees in Techno’s face, it makes Joker’s expression darken.

“You’re serious.” He doesn’t wait for a response. “Motherfucker. I should have known better than—whatever. I’ll deal with that. And if I get the book back and give it to you, what’s to stop you from doing the exact same thing?”

“Whatever else you can say about me, Joker, I’m not looking for more power. I just want to help people. If that means giving the book back to you, if that means keeping it safe myself, if that means *burning* it, then fine.” Dream stares at him, nails biting into his palms, and prays that Joker believes him. “I just want to stop Schlatt.”

“Fine. Fine! You know, the fucked up thing is I believe you, Nightmare.” Joker steps around his desk, yanking his phone out of his pocket as he does. “It’s being taken to the archives under City Hall. My contact has a similar arrangement with the archivist, and if Schlatt’s going to take it, it’ll be from there. You get it first, it’s all yours.”

“Thank you,” Dream breathes, turning to follow him to the door, Techno falling into step beside him.

“Get the fuck out of my casino. And tell Orpheus that I don’t want to see your ugly mug ever again, Blood God.” The door slams shut behind them, muffling the shouting that starts up a second later. Dream looks back, then looks at Techno.

“C’mon,” Techno says, grabbing his hand and starting to run. “We’ll stop at home to change and work out a plan.”

Chapter End Notes

Orpheus - Wilbur
Zephyrus - Philza
Hermes/Nightmare - Dream
Protesilaus - Techno
Joker - Quackity
The Jack - Fundy
The King - Purpled
The Ace - Foolish
The Queen - Slimecicle

techno: this is my "fuck my ex" outfit

dream: you and quackity dated?

techno: no but i want him to feel like we did, i broke up with him, and he deserved it

truth at any cost

Chapter Notes

Not to be sappy for a minute, but there's a couple key scenes in this fic that were core to the conception of it when I first started writing. The Protesilaus/Hector/Achilles/Patroclus conversation is one of them; the conversation that happens between Protesilaus and the Warden in this chapter is another. So I'm pretty excited to get there.

Also, for absolutely no reason whatsoever, I'm reminded of the fact that withers in game have a melee and a ranged mode. What a fun, nonrelevant fact that is.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's impossible to get into the archives under City Hall at night. That fact remains true no matter how tight a deadline they're on, and after arguing about it for almost an hour—Orpheus, exasperated and pushing for an attempt that night, while Zephyrus and Nemesis back Dream up—Dream gives up and goes to bed. The Syndicate leaves, all of them, and he's sure they're continuing the fight in their secret lair or whatever, but he's tired.

He's tired, and he's still grappling with that little comment the Queen had made, the one Techno seems to have forgotten as soon as they were in that hallway. Dream from the End. From the *End*. That shouldn't be possible. It isn't possible. Why would he say that?

No one is from the End. No one is from the Nether, either, but at least it's possible to travel there—it's brutally difficult to survive once there, and portal travel is strictly regulated by the government, but it's possible. The End is something else entirely, very nearly a joke because of how unreachable it is. They say that ender hybrids came from there once, but everyone knows that all the ender hybrids alive can trace their heritage back to one of the warped wood biomes in the Nether.

The End is where gods live. No one comes from the End.

Was it just a sly dig at his heritage? Maybe that's why Techno didn't react, but Dream can't make that fit in his head. Not when Techno's a wither hybrid, a creature far more rare than an ender hybrid (even a white one), but he still got the Esemipi treatment. The Queen didn't say he was from the Nether.

He twists under the sheets, tangling them around his legs as he punches Techno's pillow. His ribs ache and he thinks the bandages on his side need replacing, but he's not about to walk out there and wander around until he finds a first aid kit. With his luck, he'll stumble across something he's not supposed to see and Orpheus will suck the marrow out of his bones, or whatever the fuck it is that he does.

When the door creaks open and Techno slips silently into the room, it's a relief. He'll have something to focus on other than his own thoughts, other than the Queen's cheerful voice as he named Dream and where he supposedly came from. He sits up, kicking one leg until the blankets stop trapping him, and says, "Hey."

The high, surprised noise Techno makes is totally worth it. Dream laughs, choking on it until he's wheezing and bent double—not just because Techno sounds ridiculous, but because it feels good to have something to laugh at again. By the time he manages to get a hold of himself, there are tears rolling down his face and Techno is standing by the bed looking supremely unimpressed.

"Technoblade," he wheezes, wiping at his face before the tears can leave burns behind.

"Dream," Techno says, his hair still braided but missing the gold chains now. Before Dream can say anything else (and dig the hole deeper), Techno grabs his shoulder, shoving him back against the pillows and climbing on top of him. As distractions go, it's a good one.

City Hall opens at eight in the morning, sharp. The sun rises almost an hour before that, and Dream is up with it; this time, Techno and Wilbur are up as well, arguing in low voices about who gets to play music on the radio as they pull their costumes on. It's strangely domestic, watching Wilbur's fingers braiding Techno's hair—not that it will matter, once he deactivates his nullifier—while Techno adjusts Wilbur's mask and fixes the collar on the flowing blue revolutionary jacket.

Dream tugs on his lime-colored hoodie, recently dried with dark green thread patching up the holes, and feels underdressed.

"I'm surprised you're just using steel," Zephyrus says as Dream hooks his axe onto his belt. He's already dressed, his wings tucked behind his back as his hat casts his masked face in shadow. Underneath the folds of his green robe, he knows there's bandoliers of diamond-edged knives. A netherite sword sits at his hip but, as long as Dream's been active as a hero, he's never seen Zephyrus draw it.

"I'm a civilian," Dream points out as he ties his shoes. The argument in the living room is getting more heated. "I can't exactly afford to buy it, and they'd ask for ID if I did."

"Huh. We'll have to fix that." With that, Zephyrus turns his attention to his sons, cupping his hands around his mouth as he calls, "Boys! Enough. Get a move on, before I call Nemesis in to handle this instead."

Grumbling under their breath, Orpheus and Protesilaus punch the code for the elevator. Techno had explained it to him while Dream was pulling on his turtleneck, his shirt half-undone and not yet tucked into his pants. Most of the time it operated as normal, but with certain codes, it would go directly from the top floor to the basement, no civilians able to access it.

Dream hadn't mentioned the slip of the tongue revealing where the Syndicate worked. He couldn't be sure that it wasn't just a parking garage anyways, and it wasn't worth setting

Techno's anxiety off.

Once the doors shut behind them, Zephyrus clears his throat and starts walking down the hall opposite from the bedrooms. Dream hasn't been down this way, too wary to explore and more interested in the safety Techno's bedroom represents, but he cranes his head around curiously now as they pass open doors. The rec room that Wilbur had mentioned once, an office that has paintings of birds on the walls, a small home gym, another bathroom. At the end of the hall is a trap door that, when Zephyrus opens it, unfolds into steps that lead up.

It opens to the roof. Dream stands there in the soft light of dawn, breathing in deep despite the pain in his ribs. The skies are just cloudy enough to hint at rain to come, and it's warm enough already that his hoodie is a little uncomfortable. Maybe he should start wearing tanktops under it instead of sweaters.

"The boys are going to cause a ruckus on the other side of third," Zephyrus says, his wings stretching out as his feathers ruffle in the slight breeze. "They'll be close enough to help if something goes wrong, but hopefully all hero response will be concentrated on them instead of us. Ready to go?"

He breathes in and commits the view from the rooftop to memory. Then he turns and says, "Ready. Uh, do you want me to, like, do something with my hands or—"

Zephyrus laughs and, without warning, scoops him into a bridal carry. He grabs at the front of the robe, the silk slick against the leather hiding his palms, but there's no risk of him being dropped—Zephyrus is stronger than most, hefting Dream up higher as he leaps into the sky with a jolt and thunderous clap of his wings. A few more jolts, each one jerking Dream and sending an answering twist of pain through his chest, and then the ride smooths out as they glide.

He risks looking away from the black cotton shirt under Zephyrus's robe, twisting his head to peer down at the city, and gasps very softly.

Esempi is beautiful like this. He's seen it from his apartment in the Tower, the tallest building in the city, and he's seen it from a hundred other vantage points, but it's different seeing it from Zephyrus's arms. In a helicopter, there's glass and steel and *noise* keeping him from truly admiring the view, but Zephyrus's wings are outstretched and barely twitching, his low chuckle the only sound other than wind in Dream's ears.

All too soon, they start circling a skyscraper partially under construction. Zephyrus lands on one of the middle floors, setting Dream on his feet before walking to the edge where a wall should be and peering out. From this vantage point, Dream can see City Hall, three streets away.

"Got your earpiece?" Zephyrus asks, turning away from the view. "Gimme your phone and I'll get you into our call."

Dream hands his phone over with only a second of misgiving, tucking the earpiece in his ear and wincing when it beeps loudly on connection. It's not like his watch, not really, and the empty spot on his wrist still aches with that loss, but when he hears Orpheus's voice

complaining about the weather, it's almost like being home again. He thinks Wilbur and George would get along, even if Orpheus and Somnus fucking hate each other.

"Can you hear me?" he says at normal volume, waiting for three voices to give him the all clear. "Good. I'm going to go in through the roof, like last time, but I'm not sure the codes I have are going to work again. If I need to, I can climb down the elevator shaft without them, but I'll keep you guys updated."

"We have a code," Protesilaus says. "If yours doesn't work, we'll pass it on. Hopefully it hasn't been deactivated yet."

Dream pauses. He's not sure how he feels about that—it clearly isn't Zephyrus or Nemesis whose code they're using, and he doesn't know which hero had their passcodes stolen. Worst comes to worst, he can just pretend like it doesn't work either. That's better than getting someone in trouble that doesn't deserve it. "Alright. That makes this easier. I'm heading out now, if you guys want to start the distraction."

"Bank robberies are so *boring* when it's just the two of us," Orpheus says, moments before an explosion rings out. "Oops, there goes Protesilaus."

"Clear comms," Zephyrus says mildly, and Dream flashes him a thumbs up before starting his climb down the face of the building.

It would be easier—and faster—to teleport to his destination, but he doesn't want to risk it with Zephyrus watching. His ribs pull with every jump, and when he has to cling to a support beam while waiting for the wind to stop, his muscles cry out in protest. After this, after they've got the book and Schlatt's dead, he's going to sleep for a week. Long enough for his body to forget how much it hates him.

When he races across a crane overhanging the next roof, he feels eyes on his back, and reminds himself that teleporting is a bad idea. That doesn't make the landing hurt any less.

"Ow," he says without thinking as he starts to run.

"Should check those ribs again when we get back," Zephyrus says, his voice slightly tinny in Dream's ear. It's a reminder that everyone can hear him too.

Since he can't hear Orpheus and Protesilaus in return, he guesses they're muted. Considering how much talking goes on during a hostage situation, that's probably with his benefit in mind; he can't afford to have them chattering in his ear. He doesn't dare mute in return, even though it makes him uneasy to be so observed.

The jump to the roof of City Hall is slightly further than he's comfortable with, so he risks teleporting across instead. There's no comment from Zephyrus, and he hopes that means it went unseen.

"Rooftop door is unlocked," he says when it opens at a touch. "No one in the stairwell."

“That’s suspicious,” Zephyrus says, and he’s right. That door should never be unlocked, especially not after one successful heist already. It doesn’t matter that it was weeks ago, that’s still too short a time between then and now.

“Do we have any way of accessing hero comms?” Dream asks, keeping his voice low as he trots down the stairs. “This close to the Tower, we could probably use local proximity to get into the main network, right?”

There’s a long, thoughtful pause. Long enough that Dream rewinds the words in his head, picking them apart for anything off. That’s common knowledge, isn’t it? That hero comms are proximity based, to keep teams from talking over each other from different parts of the city? Even if it’s not common knowledge, it’s not unreasonable for *him* to know it, is it?

“We’d need a better access point,” is what Zephyrus finally says. “Right now, all four of us are too far from the Tower to even try.”

“Just a thought.” He falls silent after that, his heartbeat in his ears and nerves tightening his gut. Like last time, he slips down the halls with no one the wiser. There’s fewer people at this time of day compared to mid-afternoon, and when he reaches the elevators down, his code works. It still works.

Like the unlocked door, it’s suspicious. Sweat prickles between his shoulderblades, one hand dropping to curl around the handle of his axe.

Last time, the archives had been empty. This time, when he steps out onto the obsidian floor, the desk set in front of the elevators is occupied, the archivist sitting there in a purple and green jacket with a fidget toy in his hands. His eyes are gold, and when they meet Dream’s mask, they’re full of fear.

“I just want the book that Vulcan brought,” Dream says, resting his free hand on top of the desk. “That’s all I’m here for.”

“Is that who liaises with Las Nevadas?” Zephyrus asks, though it’s not as if Dream can answer. Not when he’s focused on the archivist who *isn’t* reaching for his panic button. He should be. But he isn’t.

“Look, man, I don’t have it. I never did, Schlatt picked it up right away. But it’ll be easier for you if you don’t run, okay? Just come easy, and no one gets hurt.” He’s so focused on the archivist’s face that he misses the moment the fidget toy is flipped open and clasped around his wrist, cool metal settling on the thin band of skin between his sleeve and the start of his fingerless gloves.

Abruptly, his sense of the space of the room vanishes. It’s bad enough to be stuck in an obsidian box, unable to teleport out, but now he can’t even do that much. The spark inside of him, that bit of glass that shatters every time he jumps, it’s gone. He can’t access his powers at all.

Fuck.

“I’m sorry,” the archivist whispers, but Dream isn’t listening, already sprinting back to the elevator and mashing the button.

“They have me in a nullifying cuff,” he says, yanking his axe free as the elevator arrives. “I need the code to go up, mine won’t work anymore.”

And it doesn’t, not even after he punches in the secondary override code given to cleaning staff. This has been a setup from the *beginning*, and he wonders where the failure in the chain happened. Was it Joker? Was it Vulcan, blinded by loyalty, desperate to catch the vigilante that had already escaped him once?

Zephyrus gives him the code, then adds, “The good news is, that shouldn’t affect your resistance. They don’t work so well with passive powers. Get to the roof and I can pick you up.”

This code works, thank fuck, and Dream bites his tongue before he can snap about the power that *is* suppressed. He feels off kilter and unbalanced, his usual sense of where he is lost. It’s like an inner ear infection, but across his whole body, and he keeps trying to stretch his awareness out without sensing anything. He’s in an obsidian box in the shape of his body, and it *hurts*.

Somnus isn’t waiting for him by the elevator. He stumbles down the hallway, stretching his legs out as he sprints and tries to center himself. It’s like being adrift in the void, like everything’s been moved three inches to the left, and he slams into a wall as he takes a corner too wide, staggering for a second when that ignites fire along his ribs again.

There’s a crack of a gunshot in his ear, and Zephyrus swears. “Orpheus, Protesilaus, I need you. They’ve got Team Epsilon responding, and he’s not letting me get low enough to land.”

That’s Dream’s tactic. Target Zephyrus’s wings, especially the joints, so that he can’t come in to be a problem. Combine Vulcan’s powers with explosive ammunition, and even the infamous immortality can’t keep up with sheer damage. It’s not about killing him, it’s about removing him from the equation.

He hauls himself up the stairs, dreading what he’ll find at the top, even as Orpheus and Protesilaus unmute. In the background, he can hear the confused cries of hostages as the villains leave the bank without anything, the shout from the Captain as they ignore her and flee. Is Erebus on the ground? How many heroes are going to be converging on his location?

Can’t think of that. He throws the rooftop door open and swings his axe on instinct, knocking aside the Warden’s sword as it whistles for his head. He drops, rolls, starts running again as he hears Somnus shout and the Warden’s commanding voice calling for him to surrender.

He doesn’t want to make the jump from City Hall to the next roof over without his teleportation. He does it anyways, slamming into the edge of the rooftop and rolling as his ribs crunch from the impact.

Choking back a sob of pain, he scrambles upright and starts running again. It’s damned lucky that his axe didn’t cut him when he rolled, but his luck ends there, because Somnus and the

Warden land on the rooftop a second later. Ahead of him, he can hear the crack of Vulcan's pistols, and Zephyrus is a dark shape diving and wheeling in the air, trying to dodge them.

If he can tackle Vulcan—if the skies are clear long enough for Zephyrus to grab him—if Orpheus and Protesilaus can take the heat long enough for them to get away—

He leaps down and races across a set of streetlights, hooking his axe on his belt as he scrabbles up the wall on the opposite side to reach the rooftop. Behind him, he can hear Somnus struggling to follow, and when he twists to check, the Warden has jumped to the ground and is sprinting for the closest fire escape. He's got a second or two to breathe, but no more than that.

"We're five minutes out," Protesilaus says, and Dream sucks in air while ignoring the choking pain wrapping around his chest. He can make it five minutes.

"I'm getting as close to the skyrise as I can," he says, leaping across a gap and stumbling on the other side. His balance is still off, but he's getting better at adjusting for it; if it comes to a fight, when it comes to a fight, he'll be able to defend himself without killing anyone.

"Zephyrus, can you pull back? I'll take care of Vulcan."

"I'll sweep back and hit Somnus," Zephyrus says, circling higher. Vulcan shouts, and Dream's heart aches as he speeds up, leaping from rooftop to rooftop and gaining speed. He can make out the individual words now. The half-constructed building looms ahead of him.

He hits Vulcan hard, arms wrapped around his middle as momentum carries them both to the ground. Before the hero can react, Dream rolls on top of him, punching him in the temple hard enough to hopefully knock him out. His hopes aren't answered, because fire flares up around both of them a second later.

It doesn't burn, not quite, but his skin prickles and goes tight. Not good.

He shoves himself off and away, rolling again—this time to put out the smoldering spots in his clothes. His mask is burned, pieces of it tearing off as he scrapes it against the rooftop, but there's enough of it to hide his face still. He just can't afford to get that close again.

"Motherfucker," Vulcan snarls, lifting a gun and pointing it at Dream's head.

He freezes, reaching for his powers on instinct, and nearly pukes. The world presses in under his skin, like tombstones on his back, the nullifying cuff amplifying the usual pressure from his ring. If he could, he'd lose the ring, but there's no disguise enchantments on the cuff. It's not meant to help him.

A knife slams into the back of Vulcan's hand, making him shout and drop it. The shadow of Zephyrus's wings sweeps over them, and Dream forces himself to move, running forward and tackling Vulcan to the ground again. He's up and off before fire can burst between them, dodging the sword that swings through the space his head was moments ago.

Somnus and the Warden have caught up. There's blood soaking through the blue cape and white armor at Somnus's shoulder, but there's no hesitation when he wields a dagger in each

hand. The Warden hasn't taken any damage at all.

Three versus two. He just needs to last a couple more minutes.

"Go to *sleep*," Somnus hisses, and lethargy sweeps over Dream, making him stumble as he dodges the Warden's sword again. Their powers aren't quite sticking, and he shakes the feeling off after a second, but the dual nullifiers are doing what one can't: taking away his immunity. Even if only for a second.

He can't afford even a second of it, not if they're trying to capture him alive, not if Schlatt arranged this. With a jerky motion, he yanks his axe free, getting it between his head and the sword before the next strike lands. Another wave of lethargy hits and his arm goes weak, muscles giving in for just a moment as he dodges away from the sword bearing down on him. They've noticed, and that's a problem.

Dream is so focused on the Warden and Somnus, he forgets Vulcan. He's supposed to be attacking Zephyrus, after all. But Vulcan hasn't gotten that message.

He hears the crack of the gun a seconds after his knee explodes in pain. With a shout, Dream falls, his axe sliding across the rooftop. Before he can push himself up, the Warden's foot lands in the center of his back—and then the trident slams into his arm, pinning it to the rooftop as it shatters the bones in his forearm.

There's no air left in his lungs to scream. There's no air left in his lungs to do anything except wheeze pathetically, tiny shudders rolling through him as he struggles to breathe. It hurts, and his ribs are cracking further under the Warden's weight, and when he tries to teleport away, the backlash slams into his brain and sends him whirling.

And then he hears the crunch of Protesilaus's boots on gravel.

"Scuse me," he drawls, sword in hand and soulfire flowing around him, "but you've got something that belongs to me there."

"He's under arrest," the Warden says coldly, Somnus and Vulcan moving to stand in front of him. Dream can only see their boots, his head aching too much for him to lift it. "If you walk away now, we *may* overlook this latest Syndicate attack."

There's a long silence. Dream can hear Zephyrus land somewhere behind him, and Orpheus arrives a moment later. He thinks that he might hear the Captain and Erebus in the distance, and something like dread wells up in his gut. Too many people. There's too many people involved in this, and he can't see Techno's face past the blackened skull and the pink inferno.

"How many people do you figure are in that building?" Protesilaus asks, turning his attention to the skyrise under construction. "Bottom floors are up for rent. Average family is three to five, and there's ten apartments on each floor... want to call it four hundred? Five to be safe?"

"What the fuck are you getting at?" Vulcan snaps, fire flaring around his feet. If Dream were to guess, he'd bet there was fire around his fists too.

“That’s not including the construction crews, of course. But I guess you’re going to have to remember them too.” The skull swings back around, its focus on the Warden. On Dream.

He realizes, before anyone else, and whispers, “Don’t. Please, don’t.”

“I give you five minutes before it comes down,” Protesilaus says, lifting a hand as the soulfire flares around the black bones of his palm, and then, only then, do the other heroes catch on.

There are certain villains that are considered too dangerous for lower ranked teams. Anyone outside the top ten is to call for backup; outside of Team Epsilon, all the top ranked heroes fly solo—except when dealing with people like the Syndicate. Because the reason why the Blood God is the most feared villain has nothing to do with his melee combat or the fact that his touch brings death to anyone who comes too near. It’s because he’s a wither hybrid, through and through, with all the destructive capability that entails.

His hand sweeps, like he’s batting a fly out of the air. Seconds later, craters appear along the side of the building, steel beams groaning as they wither, rust, and fail.

Vulcan and Somnus shout, sprinting for the building right away. Dream hears, out of sight, the Captain and Erebus shouting too, calling out sections of the building to focus on, priorities and demands for evacuation. The Warden doesn’t move, gravel crunching under the trident as he leans more weight against it, his boot jamming down until Dream’s ribs are crackling.

Protesilaus doesn’t look away, and his voice is perfectly even as he says, “Clock’s ticking.”

The trident yanks out of his arm, and Dream chokes out a barely audible sob of pain. Then there’s a knee between his shoulders, a hand yanking his hood back as the Warden’s other hand grabs the little finger on his left hand. Grabs, underneath the leather of his glove, the iron ring Dream hasn’t taken off in years.

“I can’t arrest you,” the Warden hisses, “but I’ll make damn sure that the Syndicate knows who they’re choosing with you.”

“Don’t,” he chokes out again, for an entirely different reason.

The ring cuts into the pad of his finger as it’s yanked off. He sees, out of the corner of his eye, his skin go ghostly white. The weight on his chest disappears but he still can’t breathe, because Protesilaus isn’t moving. The Warden’s gone and Dream can’t do anything to stop him.

Wings sweep over him. Ungentle arms wrap around his chest, yanking him up. It’s a relief, when the pain turns to darkness and knocks him out.

The Queen - Slimecicle
Zephyrus - Philza
Nemesis - Niki
Orpheus - Wilbur
Protesilaus - Techno
Hermes/Nightmare - Dream
Erebus - Eret
The Captain - Puffy
The Warden - Sam
Vulcan - Sapnap
Somnus - George
Joker - Quackity

phil: wow dream is weirdly professional and well trained for a vigilante with no experience in the hero business

five minutes later

phil: i probably should have seen that one coming, actually

Sidenote but, for all his faults (and he has *so many of them*), The Warden doesn't actually know that Schlatt's the one who killed (""killed"") Lethe. The only two aware of that are Dream and Schlatt himself. The Tower is a codependent toxic mess of coworkers and enforced found family, so one of their own murdering a hero is just Not Done; considering that Hermes is the one everyone thinks turned on his own kid, a lot of Sam's actions here are informed by that.

overdue conversations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The bed under him isn't soft, like Techno's. It's not the hard, unyielding firmness of flooring either, but when he opens his eyes and sees hospital bed railings—and his arm cuffed to one of them—Dream isn't sure that's much better. This isn't a Tower infirmary, which is the only thing he has going for him right now.

On the other hand, he's never seen the prison's infirmary, so that doesn't rule out the heroes picking him up.

When he tries to teleport out of his restraints, he slams into that wall blocking his power again. It's not as suffocating with his ring missing, but it's like lining his skin with obsidian. He tries again, unable to help the instinctive response to being trapped, then gives up when it starts a throbbing behind his eyes. There's no one in the room with him, and nothing to tell him where he is, and he's trapped.

Dream breathes, something that's surprisingly easy considering the state of his ribcage the last time he remembers trying it, and looks down at himself. His left arm is in a cast, a soft fabric one rather than hard plaster that would be heavy and hard to lift. The cuff around that arm digs into the fabric, but it doesn't restrict bloodflow, so he ignores it for the moment. His right arm is cuffed too, and the nullifying cuff sits close to his skin underneath the metal handcuffs keeping him locked to the bed. He glares at it, but short of bending in half and gnawing at it with his fangs (an option he hasn't ruled out yet) there's nothing he can do about it. His ribs don't appear to be broken, and when he wiggles until his shirt rucks up, the bandages on his side are gone, the Warden's previous gift a livid red scar rather than an open wound. His knee aches, but he can't see the lump of a brace or cast under the blankets.

So. He's been healed, but there was enough damage that some things—like a broken arm—had to fall by the wayside. Last he checked, the Federation didn't have a healer, and he's not sure about the Syndicate's resources. The fact that he's in his vigilante getup, minus the hoodie, boots, and mask, suggests Syndicate; the fact that he's still breathing suggests Federation. Neither option is ideal, but if he's in the Syndicate's hands, even if they hate him, it's still better than Schlatt.

He tries not to think about the way Techno made no move to help him, but his heart aches despite his best efforts.

There's the click of a lock, and Dream's attention snaps to the door he can't quite see around the curtain blocking his bed off. Moments later, Orpheus steps into view, still wearing his costume and his mask, soot smeared across his jaw and dust on his jacket.

“Someone has some *explaining* to do,” he croons, and Dream's stomach drops.

“Everything I told Technoblade is true,” he says, because that’s the most important thing. “What Schlatt’s doing with the book, what he’s doing with the prison, everything I’ve found and everything I’ve given you—it’s all true. The only thing I wasn’t honest about is how I found out, and no one ever asked me.”

“Consider this me asking you, then.” Smiling, Orpheus sits at the end of the bed. Dream is extremely aware of the sword at his hip, the knives he knows Orpheus keeps in wrist sheathes, and the skill his father has with a blade. “How *did* you find out what Schlatt was up to? And why did you kill Lethe?”

“I didn’t!” Dream can’t help himself, can’t stop himself from baring his teeth in a snarl, because he’s heard it again and again and *again* and he’s sick of it. “I never killed him! Not —”

He stops, breathing hard, because in a way, he did. Because even though his hand never held the sword, even though he’s made every choice he has out of a desire for revenge, even though he remembers Ranboo and wants to cry—he did get him killed. If Dream hadn’t been in that office, if he hadn’t let it be known that he was as close to Ranboo as he was, if Schlatt hadn’t seen him in the doorway and thought *leverage*, Ranboo would be alive. In the end, Dream is the reason he’s dead, no matter how much he fights against it.

“I didn’t stab him,” he says, swallowing the tears that serve no purpose. “Schlatt did, with my sword, and he disappeared right after. He can rewrite memories, or change minds, something like that, if he’s touching someone. When the Captain came in to pull me off him—because I was going to kill him for that, for killing Ra—Lethe—he made her think that she saw *me* kill him. But I didn’t. I didn’t.”

Orpheus stares at him, red eyes gleaming like rubies in the shadow of his mask. “And why did Schlatt stab him?”

“Because I found his notes, but his powers don’t work on me. No one’s do. And when Lethe walked in, I guess he—” Dream stops, because he can’t do this. Not to an audience that doesn’t care, that won’t hear him no matter what he says. “You don’t believe me. No one will. But I didn’t fucking kill him.”

“Hm.” Fingers drum against his shin and Dream seriously considers kicking him. It won’t do him any good, but he hates the feeling of Orpheus’s cold stare. Hates the way those eyes keep trying to catch his own.

Then, without saying another word, Orpheus stands and walks out of the room. The door lock clicks behind him.

There’s nothing to do in the hospital bed. Dream taps out numbers with his fingers, tests his range of motion in the bed, does a modified set of crunches when the boredom gets bad enough that exercise seems better. The scar in his side pulls, and he can feel his recently healed ribs protesting the movement, but it’s better than the boredom that makes him want to scream. He’s flexible enough to reach the nullifying cuff with his teeth, but his attempts to

get his fangs up underneath it don't achieve much. Not much more than bloodying up his wrist, at any rate.

He's in the middle of stretching, back arched and toes pointed, when the door clicks again. He straightens with a sharp jerk, cuffs rattling against the railings, his hair falling into his face and no way for him to pull it back again. It means that he sees Phil step into the room through a curtain of white, his wings out but his clothes laid back and civilian—jeans and a shirt, which looks odd when he's only ever seen Zephyrus in his costume.

The wings settle warm and heavy over his legs, feathers trailing on the floor as Phil takes a seat at the end of the bed. There isn't a chair in the room, and Dream wonders if that's because they expect him to use it as a weapon.

"Fucked up your wrist there, mate," Phil says, making no move to wrap it.

"This may come as a shock to you, but I hate the feeling of losing my powers." Dream shifts, pulling his legs up to his chest, trying to use his knee to shove his hair back behind his ears. It's dubiously effective.

"I think everyone does. Even Techno, not that'd he'd admit it." Phil reaches for his face and Dream flinches, but the fingers that brush over his cheeks are gentle as they tuck his hair out of his eyes. For a second, they linger on the scar on his cheek, then Phil pulls away. "I remember you, you know."

"We've fought a lot, so, that doesn't surprise me." He's not sure how to feel about that. Orpheus has been haughty and suspicious because Wilbur's hated his guts since day one, but Phil runs hot and cold on him. One moment, he's bandaging Dream's ribs. The next moment, he's making threats on Techno's behalf.

The little smile on his face doesn't make Dream feel any better, especially not when it doesn't reach Phil's eyes. "From before you were a hero, Dream. I don't know if I ever learned your name—the Captain didn't share that, and I tried not to get too attached to the kids living in the Tower—but that little ender hybrid that hid under my wing during a storm... yeah, I remember you. What happened?"

"Well, you defected..." He narrows his eyes, chin propped on his knees as his cuffs rattle softly, his focus on Phil's ear so he doesn't risk meeting those cold blue eyes.

"No, I mean," and Phil's wings mantle in a way that makes Dream tense, "what changed that kid into the kind of person who kills his protégé in cold blood?"

"I didn't," he snaps. They already know who he is, protesting his innocence won't do anything to compromise his identity.

"Right," Phil says dryly. "Schlatt's got an unregistered power to rewrite memories, and he just happened to stab the kid with your sword while convincing him you did it?"

"I don't know what he was planning on doing with him," Dream says, "I just know that he touched the Captain and—"

Hang on. Dream stops, falling silent as he frowns. He mentioned the sword to Orpheus, but he hadn't said anything about Schlatt touching Ranboo. And the way Phil is talking, it's like he knew about the sword already, like it was a forgone conclusion—which it isn't, because Dream's watched all the media coverage. He's seen everything the Captain's said about him. His sword isn't ever mentioned, just the fact that he murdered Ranboo.

Ranboo disappeared, and they never found a body. He stares at Phil, meeting his gaze, and the buzz of anxious defensiveness is drowned out by the knowledge that Ranboo came *here*, that somehow the Syndicate stumbled on him and—

“Where is he?” Dream whispers. “What did you do with his body?”

“Body?” Phil asks, head tipped, still staring into Dream's eyes.

“You *motherfucker* what did you do with my *baby brother*?” The noise that rips out of his throat is inhuman, a crackling growl that raises in pitch as he lurches forward. His arms strain against the cuffs locking him down, shoulders slowly slipping out of socket, and he doesn't care, he doesn't fucking care, because Phil is leaning back and *looking at him* and they have Ranboo's body, they have him, they have him and they won't give him back and Dream—

Static washes through his ears as darkness falls over his eyes. He screams, a creaking, popping noise that echoes in the room oddly, his fingers curled like they want to be claws, his powers flaring wildly against the nullifier that keeps him trapped. He screams, because he can't do anything else, and the tears that slip down his face burn.

“Shh,” he hears eventually, when the rage has burned out and left a frigid void behind. His eyes are still covered, but he realizes with dull surprise that it's a hand keeping him from seeing anything, the other arm wrapped around his shoulders. His body is twisted up, bent over with his arms pinned grotesquely back, legs tangled in the blankets of the hospital bed he's trapped in, but the hands on him are gentle.

Dream is still crying, and he can't make himself stop.

“Shh, I'm sorry,” Phil murmurs as feathers brush over his back and the slowly numbing stretch of his arms. His hand shifts from curling around Dream's dislocated shoulder to running through his hair, the other hand still firm over his eyes. “That was a dirty trick to play. You're okay, mate. It's alright.”

“He was my brother,” Dream sobs, cotton under his chin as he leans into the steady wall of Phil's chest, uncaring of how much his arms hurt. “He was my brother and everyone thinks I killed him, but I wouldn't. *I wouldn't.*”

It's like a box has been opened that he can't shut again, like a snow globe shattering and spilling its guts across the floor. All the grief, all the rage, all the regret that he's pushed away so he can focus on getting revenge—it's free now, flowing through him until he's a piece of driftwood on a storm-tossed sea, desperate for land with no shore in sight. Two months, he's thought Ranboo was dead. But Phil talks about him like he can remember what happened, and what he remembers is Dream killing him.

“For what it’s worth, Wilbur believes you. About all of it.” Phil hesitates, then slowly starts to pull the hand away from his eyes. “C’mon, sit up. That’s not good for your arms.”

He presses further forward, hiding his face in Phil’s shoulder instead. If he leans back, he might accidentally catch Phil’s eyes with his own and explode in rage again, and at least this is a pain he knows how to handle. It’s just physical.

“Okay, no, come on.” Phil’s hands grab his shoulders, pushing him back until he’s sitting straight. The cuffs are no longer pulling his arms back, but the numbness prevails, his fingertips tingling as a burning ache drags down his nerves. Dream keeps his eyes shut tight.

There’s the soft click of a key in the cuffs, and for just a second, he considers lashing out and trying to run. But only for a second. Where would he run to?

“This is going to hurt,” Phil says, before pain explodes through him. With a hiss, Dream tries to scramble back, but Phil’s grip on him is ruthless as he grabs the other arm and shoves it back into socket too. The numbness is fading, but what’s replacing it is pure pain, especially now that Dream can feel the way his right wrist is cut up from his teeth and his desperate yanking at the cuffs. “The original reason I came in here is to see if you were safe to talk to Ranboo.”

Dream forgets how to breathe. His eyes snap open, but this time Phil is careful not to meet them, his attention trained on something to the left of his head. Because Phil’s been talking about him like he’s alive, but how would he know Ranboo’s name, and why would he know —

“How?” Dream whispers, voice hoarse and cheeks burning.

“Niki introduced us,” Phil says, grabbing the bloodied arm and inspecting it. “The good news is, this probably doesn’t need stitches. She worked with him before she came to us, and she thought he’d be a good fit for the Syndicate. Unlike us two, he wasn’t burned by the Federation either, which meant he could pass on information that wasn’t too sensitive for us to know.”

Dry land has never seemed further away. Dream is adrift, holding onto sense by the barest thread, and underneath him is a sea that will kill him if he falls in. He’s not sure which is more unbelievable: that Ranboo survived a sword through his heart, or that he’s been a traitor this whole time.

Then again, maybe it doesn’t matter. He knows which one he cares about more.

“He’s alive,” Dream says, swallowing. “He’s alive and he’s here.”

“Yep.” Phil stands, opening a cupboard across the room and pulling gauze and bandages out, shoving a bottle of antiseptic under one arm.

“And he thinks I killed him. But you’re still willing to let me see him anyways?” The last comes out more pleading than Dream intends, but he can’t help it. If Phil is here to tell him

that Ranboo is alive but Dream can never talk to him—if he's going to be trapped in a hellish limbo where he can't even see Ranboo again—

“He's weak, been in a coma for the last couple months, but I think he's strong enough to handle this,” Phil says, sitting back down and pulling Dream's arm over the sheets. He doesn't warn for the sting before pouring the antiseptic over the gouges in his skin, but Dream doesn't flinch.

(“He's awake,” Phil says, and Dream watches Techno leave and never questions it, never asks, never looks into it further. Never tries to find Ranboo's body. Never, never, never.)

“When?” Dream asks as Phil wipes his arm down and wraps it in gauze, securing the bandages with a couple pins.

The Angel of Death looks up at him, still careful not to meet his eyes, and says, “Now, if you're up for it.”

Ranboo is thinner than he was the last time Dream saw him. His hands shake as he flips through a book, his long frame oddly fragile looking where he's curled up on his bed. The private room down near the infirmary is clearly meant for an invalid, only recently updated to account for a teenage boy that's up and moving under his own power. His hair is longer.

He's alive, and the sight takes Dream's breath away.

“Remember,” Phil tells him as he goes to open the door, “the last thing he remembers is you trying to kill him. Don't move too fast, don't get too close, and if it looks like you're stressing him out too much, I'm removing you from the room.”

“Got it,” Dream says, unable to tear his eyes away. He flicks his gaze down to Ranboo's hands when the sound of the door opening makes him turn, but he doesn't miss the way he tenses up, or the soft gasp of surprise. Of fear.

Ranboo is afraid of *him*, and that rips his heart to shreds.

“Hey Ranboo,” he says, keeping his voice as gentle as he can. “I can leave if you want me to, but I'd like to talk. Just talk. Is that okay?”

There's a long pause. He watches Ranboo's hands, doesn't dare lift his gaze any higher—not just because he's afraid of meeting Ranboo's eyes when his emotions are already on the edge of boiling over again, but because it will kill him to see the fear in Ranboo's face. If the affection and admiration that was once there is replaced with anxiety instead, he won't be able to handle it.

“It will be easier to talk if you're—if you're over here,” Ranboo says eventually. He still shifts away on the bed when Dream walks to the chair next to it, but he doesn't teleport away. Phil takes up a guard position next to the door, and Dream can't find it in himself to resent that, not if it makes Ranboo feel safer.

“Phil told me you remember me stabbing you,” Dream says, staring at his own hands now. “That’s *not* what happened but I don’t know how to get the real memories back. I don’t know how Schlatt rewrites them, or what happens to the original ones when he does. But even if you can’t remember what really happened—even if you never know the truth—I want you to know that I’m sorry.”

He hears Ranboo clear his throat and can picture the way his fingers will be twisting together. “If you didn’t do it, why are you sorry?”

“You shouldn’t have been in that room.” He presses his thumb into the space where his ring should be and frowns. “If I hadn’t started questioning Schlatt about that notebook, or if I’d played along, he wouldn’t have stabbed you. It was never about you, Ranboo, it was about framing *me*. So I’m sorry.”

“You’re not mad that I’m part of the Syndicate?” Ranboo asks, wary and confused. “I mean, I assume you know about that, since uh, Phil is the one bringing you here and all, but—”

“I really could give less of a shit about that at this point,” Dream says, smiling without any joy. “I’ve been a vigilante breaking the law left and right for a month, apparently Sapnap’s been dicking down the leader of Las Nevadas *and* the official Federation archivist, and at this point I’m just waiting to hear that the Captain’s been secretly passing along information too.”

“She isn’t *not* passing along information,” Phil says from behind him, sounding amused. “Vulcan’s name is Sapnap? As in, Bad’s kid?”

“Uh oh,” Dream and Ranboo say simultaneously, before Dream huffs out a laugh and Ranboo lets out a watery chuckle.

Ranboo’s hand reaches out, resting on the bandages wrapped around his arm. His claws are clipped, but otherwise it’s like any other day in the Tower, Ranboo’s spindly fingers stretching far beyond what Dream’s are capable of. And he doesn’t pull away when Dream shifts his hand to curl around it, squeezing until Ranboo squeezes back.

“You’re alive,” Dream says, finally looking up. Ranboo’s eyes are downturned, and there’s still a pinch of fear in his face, but his grip is steady. He’s the bravest kid Dream’s ever met. “You’re alive, Ranboo, and that’s the only thing I care about.”

“That’s good,” Ranboo says. Then he clears his throat and adds, “But I really didn’t need to know *anything* about Sapnap’s sex life, just so you know.”

And the smile Dream gives him this time is real.

Phil doesn’t handcuff him to the bed when they return to the infirmary, but it’s with the unstated agreement that Dream won’t leave it anyways. He waits about ten minutes before breaking that rule, dropping to the floor and doing pushups because he’s got nothing better to do. His wrists ache, both of them, but he ignores it.

Niki walks in on him standing on the bed, inspecting the ceiling panels for possible exit points. She's still got flour on her shirt and a swipe of colored frosting on one cheek, long since dried. He's pretty sure she doesn't even know it's there.

"What are you doing?" she asks, sounding curious rather than angry.

"Breaking the rules," Dream tells her, dropping down and curling his legs under himself, leaving her enough room to sit. She does with a soft sigh, the hours in the bakery clearly weighing on her. "Are you mad?"

"I don't know," she says, which is probably the most honest thing he's heard all day. "I don't know. I vouched for you, you know. I told them that you'd fall on a sword before you ever gave us up. But I don't think I was wrong?"

He thinks about it, tail curling around his waist, the empty spaces on his wrist and his little finger burning. Stripped of every mask, every piece of the Tower remaining, he's just Dream. And for better or worse, Niki's read him right.

"I'm not going to give you up," he says, curling his hands around his ankles. "I mean, for one, I'm persona non grata at the Tower right now. For two, you guys helped me when you didn't have to, and I'm not going to throw that away. I owe you. You probably most of all."

"I don't really care about favors," she says, pulling her hair out of its ponytail and realizing, finally, that there's frosting on her cheek. "I just... I just want to know that my friend was really my friend. You know?"

The thing is, he remembers Nemesis. She'd been close with the trainees, and she'd joined up the year after Dream, shortly before Vulcan was named as a hero. They had passed each other in the halls and traded jokes, and he'd liked her team. When she'd defected, it hadn't been a surprise, because Schlatt had handled the clusterfuck of her teammates dying in the worst way possible—and Dream hadn't been able to hold it against her.

His team was uniquely bad at matching up against her, so they were never sent to deal with Nemesis, who handled Syndicate missions separately from the three founding members, and Dream's always been grateful for that. He remembers her as a caring woman with a spine of solid steel, a moral center more grounded than the Tower itself. That hadn't changed when her loyalties shifted. That hasn't changed now.

She gave him a job and lifeline when he needed it. Dream smiles at her and leans back, saying, "I'd like to be friends. I want to be friends, still. I'm not sure Wilbur's going to be happy with it, or—"

He can't say Technoblade's name, and her expression softens when he cuts himself off before trying. Her voice is light and teasing when she says, "Wilbur can suck it up. It's *my* bakery, I can employ who I want."

"So I'm not getting fired?" he asks, not entirely sure if he's joking.

“I really hate getting up at four in the morning to prebake,” she tells him. “After all this—once we’ve taken Schlatt down—you still have a job. If you want it. If you don’t go back to the Tower.”

“Hermes is dead.” He doesn’t quite meet her eyes, but he comes close. “I’m not going back.”

She nods, rather than pressing him on it. Then she changes the subject, letting him ignore the festering ache in his heart that sounds like Techno’s voice saying his name. It’s probably the kindest thing she’s ever done for him.

Wilbur comes by with dinner, his nullifying ring, and a warning.

“We’re moving on the Tower tomorrow,” he says, dropping the ring in Dream’s palm. “We’ll remove the cuff then, but we don’t want you running off and warning anyone. Just in case.”

“I thought you believed that I didn’t stab Ranboo,” Dream says, running his thumb over the cool iron before slipping it into place. He doesn’t activate it, not when the cuff is still trapping him in his own skin.

“Oh, I believe that. Things don’t line up right otherwise; why can Ranboo remember every single moment of you stabbing him with perfect clarity, but everything else is foggy? And if that’s his only remaining memory, why doesn’t he remember the Captain standing there?” Wilbur smiles, a sharp, mean thing, and continues without waiting for an answer. “It would explain a lot about how Schlatt’s gotten away with this for so long. But you’re a bleeding heart, Dream, and I don’t trust *you* for a second.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or a threat.” He takes the dinner, noting the lack of anything in need of a knife for cutting. “Are we just sieging the Tower, then?”

“We’re hitting them on three fronts.” Wilbur flicks out a finger for each one as he lists it off. “First, Ranboo and I are going to collect his team to set off some distractions to lure the heroes out. Then we’re going straight to the most public broadcasting station there is and releasing your information on Schlatt at the same time as we reveal that he’s the one who tried to kill Ranboo. While we’re doing that, Phil and Niki are going to handle the remaining heroes at the Tower. You and Techno are going straight for Schlatt, because you’re the only two he can’t affect with a touch.”

“And when it’s over?” Dream asks, refusing to believe that they won’t succeed.

“When it’s over, I suppose the Federation will need some restructuring. Or maybe they’ll collapse entirely, and it will make taking over the prison easier. Not my problem either way.” Wilbur shrugs, then turns to leave.

“Does Techno know the plan?” He has to ask, because he hasn’t seen Techno all day. He has to ask, because part of Dream is stupid and idealistic and filled with a relentless kind of hope, desperate to believe that this hasn’t ruined things between them.

Wilbur stops at the edge of the curtain, looking back at him. For once, his eyes are filled with pity, rather than contempt. “He’s the one that told us to leave the cuff on you until it’s time to go.”

He leaves, and Dream doesn’t ask anymore questions. The meal tastes like ash in his mouth, but he finishes it off because he doesn’t know if there will be time for breakfast in the morning. An hour later, the lights in the room turn off, probably on some automated sensor, and he lays back in bed, running his thumb over the ring and staring out into the dark.

His eyes fall shut. He activates the nullifier, feeling his disguise slip on as his powers are repressed even further. He waits.

He sleeps.

It’s the top of the Tower, and everything is covered in snow. The blinding white matches his skin, but the snow doesn’t burn, not even when it melts on his hands, his cheeks, and it’s not so cold that he needs more than his hoodie. His green one, the one he stole the day after running from the Tower, its holes patched in threads just a few shades off.

Against his back is a warm body, the curve of a spine almost as familiar as his own. They sat here once, years and years ago, right on the edge of the roof as they looked down on the lights. Esemipi is beautiful from above, but it really shows its colors in the dead of night. The sky is black, despite the shine of the snow, and below him stretches the city in all its finery, lights upon lights making it gleam like a diamond.

“How’d you do it?” he asks, watching the city instead of turning his head to see the man behind him. Even with both nullifiers active, he hadn’t been sure George could reach him, and he doesn’t dare do anything that might destabilize the dream.

“You know how Erebus can act like a beacon and charge up powers?” George says, his head on Dream’s shoulder and his hair tickling one pointed ear. “After we finished evacuating the construction—Blood God was lying, by the way, there were only workers on site, those apartments hadn’t been sold yet—they approached me. They thought that maybe, with our powers combined, I could reach you, since you were wearing the cuff.”

“It’s a pretty hardcore nullifier.” He blinks the snow out of his lashes and stares out at the sixth district, its neon glow finally matched by the rest of the city. “I didn’t kill Lethe.”

“Of course you didn’t.” George scoffs softly. “Honestly, Dream, you’re so stupid. We never believed it. *Literally* anyone else is more likely than you. And Schlatt’s been visiting the prison an awful lot since you left.”

It warms something in his chest to hear George’s unwavering faith in him, even after everything he’s done. Dream swallows, trying not to cry, because even in the dream his face feels raw from his earlier tears. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you and Sapnap before I ran. Schlatt can rewrite people with a touch, and I needed to keep you guys safe.”

“Idiot. We’re a *team*. We would have had your back, no matter what.” George thumps his head against his shoulder, then goes quiet. They sit there like that for what feels like hours, in the timeless way that dreams pass, but eventually he asks, “So, what’s the plan?”

“There’s going to be a series of distractions—not sure what, but since Daedalus is going to be involved, assume explosions—that draw the other heroes from the Tower. It’s not going to look like Syndicate work at first, so I expect Schlatt to keep the top ranked heroes on hand. There’s going to be four of us hitting the Tower, but Protesilaus and I are prioritizing him, so the other two will need backup.” He swallows, knowing that he’s about to ask for the impossible. “I need you to help them keep the other heroes in check.”

Silence. George breathes in, slowly, and lets it out in a gusty sigh. “You’re asking us to turn traitor.”

“Yes.”

“We’re going to lose our hero rank, maybe even get arrested.”

“I know.”

“If we do this, there’s no going back.”

“I’m sorry,” Dream says, staring at the city he loves. The city he’ll do anything for. The city that hates him now.

“Okay. Just wanted to make sure you knew that.” George sighs again. “I’ll talk to Sapnap, and I can maybe get Erebus on our side too. We’ll handle it.”

“Thank you.” He shuts his eyes, knowing that he doesn’t deserve that trust. Knowing that he’s going to ruin their lives just as badly as he ruined Ranboo’s, just as badly as he ruined Techno’s. But he can’t afford to do anything else.

Schlatt dies tomorrow, no matter the cost.

Chapter End Notes

Orpheus - Wilbur
Protesilaus - Techno
Zephyrus - Philza
Nemesis - Niki
Lethe - Ranboo
Hermes/Nightmare - Dream
The Captain - Puffy
Vulcan - Sapnap
Somnus - George
Erebus - Eret

Daedalus - Tubbo

Icarus - Tommy

An earlier draft had Wilbur laying on the bed and talking Dream's ear off while he was a (literal) captive audience, but the pacing didn't work as well. But know, in my heart, at some point Wilbur takes that thirty minutes and instead of interrogating Dream the way he insinuates, it's thirty minutes of random trivia and complaining about his romantic woes while Dream tries to gnaw his own arm off the entire time.

endings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

His internal clock tells him it's shortly before dawn when he wakes up, but the infirmary remains pitch black. He drags his thumb over the ring until it deactivates and the nauseating feeling of being trapped under his own skin lessens.

There's no way to know for sure whether George will get the message to Erebus and Sapnap. No way to know if they'll stay out of the fight, or if he's just ruined their chance at the element of surprise. He'd only hoped to have his team on his side again; if they get Erebus as well, that's a factor opposing Technoblade that is no longer on the table. But that's a pretty big *'if'*.

Dream stares at the ceiling until the lights flicker on without warning, blinding him for a moment. It's while he's still blinking the stars out of his eyes that the lock on the door clicks, and by the time he can see again, Techno is standing at the end of the bed with the key for the nullification cuff in hand. Or rather, Protesilaus stands there, in his mask and cape, even without his powers activated.

(The lights of Las Nevadas make Techno's hair glow gold, and Dream watches him while thinking he'll never be richer than he is in this moment with Techno at his side.)

"Give me your wrist," he says, voice flat and hard. Dream offers it, making no move to peel the bandages off himself. He doesn't know why—maybe he wants Techno to acknowledge the damage, to see just how much he hated wearing a cuff that was, in the end, an unnecessary precaution. There's no shift in the emotionless set of Protesilaus's mouth, and his touch is efficient but not lingering as he unwraps the gauze and removes the cuff.

He makes no move to put the bandages back on and, after a second of hesitation, Dream pulls his arm back against his chest.

"It can't be more than a hour after dawn," Dream says, running his thumb over the scabbed up gouges in his skin, the ring heavy on his little finger with one final lie between them.

"When are we moving?"

"We're heading to the rendezvous point together," Protesilaus says, dropping his mask and his hoodie on the bed before setting his boots and axe next to the small side table holding Phil's medical supplies. "Get dressed. Orpheus told me he already briefed you on the plan."

"We take care of Schlatt, everyone else makes sure nothing is standing in our way." He pulls on the hoodie, still stained with his blood from yesterday and smelling of soot and cement dust. His boots are next and, after a moment of hesitation, his mask; no doubt his identity has been spread around the Tower already, but that's no reason to tip off the news agencies that will undoubtedly start covering the attack on the Tower.

His reputation is already in ruins, so maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe it shouldn't. But Dream wants to keep Hermes and Nightmare separate, even if only for one more day.

They don't talk on their way out. The last time he and Protesilaus had gone on a mission—the time before everything went wrong—it had been easy enough to run to seventh. Third isn't so far away that Dream can't run it, but it's not close either, and he suspects they're on a strict timeline. Either way, he's led to a nondescript sedan with rental plates, and he doesn't protest as he climbs in the passenger seat.

There is no argument about what to put on the radio. They do not listen to anything as Techno navigates the early morning traffic, eventually pulling into a parking garage close to the Tower. At the very top, where no one wants to park, there's a group of people already waiting, and a cold stone settles in Dream's gut when he recognizes the costumes of Icarus and Daedalus.

Right. Orpheus had mentioned that Ranboo's team would be helping, but Dream hadn't expected to *see* them, or to see Ranboo standing there towering over them both, his hands resting on their shoulders to help keep himself upright.

"You aren't pushing yourself too hard, are you?" he asks, unable to stop himself. The rest of the Syndicate turn to look at him, but Ranboo's tail just flicks once before settling again. Maybe because Dream is still well out of reach.

"I—" he starts to say before something clicks in Icarus's head and the teen whirls, his wings flaring.

"You *motherfucker!*" he shouts, four voices shushing him immediately. Tommy—because this is Tommy shaking his way free of Ranboo's grip on his shoulder and storming closer—ignores them all. "How could you fucking *do* that to him?"

"Tommy, I told you—" Ranboo starts to say, but this time Dream is the one to cut him off.

"Icarus, we are in the field and on a mission." His voice is clipped, harsh, and probably too cruel considering the emotions Tommy's going through right now. It doesn't matter. It can't matter. They have to see this through. "Whatever problem you have with me, and I'm not—I'm not saying it's not a *legitimate* problem—it can wait."

"Oh, and it's just so easy for you to just ignore it and move on, isn't it, *Hermes?*" Tommy snarls, fists clenched at his sides and wings mantled.

The selective listening is going to be a problem in the field, a detached part of Dream thinks. Maybe Ranboo can get a handle on that, but he's going to need someone else to be the muscle behind him that Dream isn't anymore. Protesilaus wouldn't be a bad place to start.

Or Orpheus, since he's the one to rest a hand on Tommy's shoulder and gently, but firmly, redirect him. "We don't have time, Tommy. I'm sorry. Now that everyone's here, it's time to move. Are we ready?"

The last is directed at the crowd as a whole, and everyone nods. Dream keeps his hands fisted in his front pocket, the cast on his left arm hidden by his sleeve and the blood soaking the other sleeve tucked out of sight. As Icarus rejoins his team and shakes the personal off to be replaced by the professional, Daedalus pulls a device of some kind out of one of the pouches on his belt. A trigger mechanism, if Dream had to guess.

“Our countdown is ten,” he calls, voice raised just enough for everyone to hear.

Nemesis and Zephyrus are watching the Tower. Since they’re the ones who will be fighting the majority of the heroes left behind, they have the most reason to note exactly who’s leaving.

“Nine.”

Icarus isn’t looking at anyone anymore, jaw firmed and hands folded behind his back. A soldier’s posture.

“Eight.”

Ranboo isn’t in costume but, like Hermes, his ender heritage has been a matter of public consumption since he was granted a hero name. No one will be able to accuse him of faking.

“Seven.”

Orpheus still has a hand on Icarus’s shoulder and Dream wonders when that happened, when they grew so close. When he’d been replaced.

“Six.”

Are the bombs at points of infrastructure or points of cultural importance? When they were placed, did Daedalus account for morning traffic?

“Five.”

Because these kids mean well, but they haven’t been in the game as long as he has, don’t know the city the way he does. He’s going to leave them the world, and he’s so terrified that the weight will crush them.

“Four.”

They’re not Atlas. He was never Atlas. It’s a cruelty, not a gift.

“Three.”

Protesilaus still won’t look at him.

“Two.”

Dream shuts his eyes.

“One.”

He feels the dull thud of the explosions, one after another. At a guess, all the bombs went off simultaneously, but distance means the shockwaves come at different points. It also means that he can't pinpoint any particular one, not until he opens his eyes and looks at the columns of smoke rising across every district in the city, the wail of sirens starting only a few moments later.

It takes less than five minutes for the first team to be dispatched from the Tower, and Dream watches with the rest of them as one, then another, then a third, fourth, fifth is dispatched. Then the solo heroes, both lower ranked and—his heart lifts a bit when he realizes—the lower four top ranked heroes.

That leaves in the Tower five heroes in total: the Captain, the Warden, Erebus, Somnus, and Vulcan. Right now, their odds look very, very good.

Ranboo grips Icarus's other shoulder and takes a firm hold of Daedalus with his other hand. He breathes in, slow and careful, the way Dream had taught him years and years ago when he was first learning to control where and when he teleported. Hermes has never been able to drag a passenger along, but Lethe...

With the soft crack of displaced air and the oddly electronic hum of an ender hybrid's power activating, all four of them disappear. Time for the morning special, breaking news to match the assumed terrorist attack on the city. Which, when Dream thinks about it, isn't wrong—it's just that their target isn't the city, not really. It's the white pillar that stands at the center of third district, unbreached in all the decades the Federation has been operating.

“Nemesis, Zephyrus,” he says before they can leap down, and both of them pause to look at him. Protesilaus's head twitches, but only just. “I know I don't have any right to ask favors right now but, my team. My old team. If they don't attack you, can you let them be? Please?”

“That's an awful big favor for a man without a lot left to give,” Zephyrus says, watching him as Nemesis summons herself a floating platform of water. “Why ask for it?”

“Because they're going to try and help,” Dream says, refusing to look any of them in the face. “I talked with Somnus last night, and he's going to work with Vulcan to keep the playing field even.”

“Of course,” Protesilaus mutters, and the bitterness would sting if Dream hadn't been expecting it.

“Well, here's to hoping we're not walking into a trap.” Zephyrus shrugs, as if to say *what can you do?*, and dives off the side of the parking garage. Nemesis follows seconds behind, her water manifesting a stream for her to swim through at speeds that rival his.

“Try not to screw up anything else,” Protesilaus says, jumping down to follow them. Dream hisses an expletive between his teeth, alone where no one can hear him, then teleports down and starts to run.

The ground floor of the Tower is publicly accessible, as are the ten floors above it—that's where interviews are conducted, where complaints are heard and plea deals are brokered, where the expedited justice system that the Tower operates under is put into place. Those are the floors for civilians, and the next ten floors are the floors for hopefuls and recruits. The group home Dream grew up in is on floor thirteen, and the classrooms for hero track trainees are spread between floors sixteen and nineteen.

They do not enter on the ground floor; Nemesis and Zephyrus, guided by old habit, aim for the twenty-first floor and the balconies there, where most heroes enter and exit when running patrols. No one wants to see a hero on the streets, because civilians live and work and play on the streets; heroes should be on rooftops as much as possible, wherever possible, because the best hero is one that is seen from a distance and never encountered. The best heroes aren't people, and they don't belong where people do.

Old habit serves them well. The Captain and the Warden are already waiting for them there—or rather, they would be, if both of them weren't currently occupied trying to keep Vulcan from burning down the launch rooms around them.

There's no sign of Somnus or Erebus, and Dream can't help the feeling of relief at that. George is good, but his powers work best when no one is expecting them and when he's not in the middle of the fight. This situation, with Vulcan manifesting infernos that turn to fogbanks when Nemesis uses his fire to make steam, where the Warden is attacking with a ferocity that shows he's not taking prisoners this time, this is a bad matchup for his powers.

"We've got this!" Vulcan shouts as he drops low to let Zephyrus swing his sword, finally unsheathed, at the Captain. "Elevators are unlocked!"

"Hermes, *wait!*" the Captain shouts, but Dream isn't listening and neither is Protesilaus, both of them sprinting past the battle and heading straight for the elevators.

Floors twenty-one through twenty-three are the staging floors, built for quick exits with weapons in hand. They have the armories and each floor is equipped with an emergency clinic as well, in the event that a hero can't wait to reach the actual medical wing on floor thirty-two. After that, it's training rooms, lecture halls, recreation rooms to keep heroes from killing each other out of boredom. Libraries. The official archives. The Vault.

The elevator shoots past them all, up to the offices—past the offices—past the floors with apartments set aside, more than there's ever been heroes, because the Federation bleeds optimism—and then up, up, up.

(He takes the elevator once, and gets told off for it. The next time he goes to the roof, it's under his own power, calculating the distance between floors and climbing with short hops. There's almost seventy floors between his room with three other children and the roof, but Dream is determined and filled with a grim sort of refusal to quit.

When he reaches his destination, victory is bittersweet. The skies open up seconds later, and it's only the broad stretch of a black wing that keeps him from carrying burns back down.)

“You seem awfully convinced he’s on the roof,” Protesilaus says as the numbers on the elevator’s display climb.

“Schlatt’s not stupid,” Dream says, refusing to look over, no matter how badly he aches to reach out and touch, to apologize, to beg for forgiveness for something he would do again in a heartbeat.

Because that’s the problem, in the end. Dream would do everything the same way if he had to repeat it, despite all the lies, despite how much it hurts now. If it means having even a few good memories of Techno, if it means getting revenge for Ranboo, if it means stopping Schlatt once and for all—he’d do it again. So he doesn’t beg, and he doesn’t expect to be forgiven. There’s no point, if he won’t change.

“If he’s not stupid, then why’s he on the roof?” There’s something genuinely curious in Protesilaus’s voice, the first emotion Dream’s heard from him since the Warden ripped his disguise off. He’s reminded, abruptly, that for all the familiarity they have with the Federation, Techno and Wilbur have never lived in the Tower. They don’t *know*.

“Right now, Orpheus and Lethe are airing all his dirty laundry,” Dream says, his axe heavy in his hand as he pulls it off his belt. “We’re sieging the Tower. The moment those explosions went off, he knew something was going down. But he’s been busy at the prison, Somnus said, so he’s got a plan to turn this all around in his favor and he’s finally got the means to do so. The Tower’s the highest point in the city.”

“And?” A hint of impatience now. Techno doesn’t understand, because he’s never felt that raw hunger and jealousy that Dream’s felt, that he feels even now at the idea that someone might take Esemipi from him.

“And he’s getting a good look at his prize for when he wins,” Dream says as the elevator begins to slow. “Schlatt’s going to kill us on this rooftop, so he’s got the world at his feet when he does.”

There’s a soft chime and the doors open. They step out on the last floor, the floor that no one lives on. Stairs stretch up to steel doors and Dream begins to climb, Protesilaus a half second behind him, then a half second ahead of him, his powers flaring as his nullifier catches the light and soulfire cooks his body down to black bones.

It’s that half second that saves Dream, because when the concrete of the roof snaps up in a cage around them, he’s just enough of a step behind to dodge it. Protesilaus isn’t so lucky, the bright burn abruptly cut off as he’s entombed—and then it’s just Dream, the fallen hero, and Schlatt, the man who threw him off the ledge in the first place.

“You fucking prick,” Schlatt says, hands in the pockets of his slacks, shoulders relaxed. There’s a pair of books resting on the ground at his feet, bound in leather that looks ancient and alarmingly like skin. Dream thinks he can see the faded lines of old tattoos along the cover of one, and he feels sick.

“That’s me,” is what he says instead of screaming, no matter how good that would feel, “the prick. Boy, it must be *killing* you that you couldn’t stop me in the end, huh?”

Schlatt laughs, making his spine crawl. Dream slowly circles the edge of the roof, putting distance between himself and the concrete box Protesilaus is trapped in, its walls already beginning to crumble and fall inward. If he can keep Schlatt's attention split—

“Five fucking years.” Those flat-pupiled eyes are still watching him, and the more he looks, the more Schlatt seems *wrong*. Like there's someone else looking out of his eyes. Like there's dozens of them, struggling to get free of his skin. “Five fucking years, pourin' my blood, sweat, and spit into that goddamn book, and here you come to try and ruin it all at the last second. You have any idea how much that pisses me off?”

“Well. You tried to kill Lethe. So, yeah, kinda.” Dream keeps his own voice perfectly level and he's rewarded by the slightest twitch of Schlatt's eye. Good. His temper is slipping. “Bet you peed yourself from joy when the second book showed up.”

“Oh, buddy, I did much worse than that.” Schlatt grins, gesturing down at the books, gravel crunching under his dress shoes as he turns. The cement prison is nearly broken. “I've been working off incomplete translations—dead languages, dead researchers, you know the drill—but with the second book... let's just say that we won't need any more fuckin' recruits. Not with me around. Fuck it, I'm thinking of returning to the business.”

His heart stops as the Tower shudders in the winds, sending him stumbling as Schlatt finally pulls his hands free of his pockets. He's got super strength and better than average reflexes, a combination that had put him at the top when he was Ares, a combination that had driven his retirement when his legendary temper got to be too much. He's got an unregistered ability to rewrite memories with a touch, something that's never been discovered before Dream failed to fall for it.

He's got much more than that now, and when he launches himself forward—too fast, too fast, Ares had never been that *fast*—it's almost too quick for Dream to dodge. If Schlatt lands a hit, he's done for. His skin goes cold as he realizes that dodging might be the only thing he *can* do.

“Ares is back, baby!” Schlatt howls with laughter, fire sweeping up around them, gravity trying to crush Dream down and only succeeding at turning the gravel to powder. “And once I've got you out of my way, no one, *no one*, is going to stop me from getting some law and fucking order around here!”

The ground jolts under his feet and Dream teleports, then teleports again and again. When he tries to drive his axe into Schlatt's skin, it gets stuck half an inch in. He's forced to let go and dodge away from the hand grabbing for him, and there's no blood on the blade when Schlatt yanks it out and snaps the handle over his knee.

There's no time to mourn his axe. He doesn't have a weapon, and Schlatt's body *is* a weapon now.

He twists away from another blow, then around, using his tail to counterbalance in a way that feels almost unnatural after two months going without. And then, just as he begins to wonder if he'll be able to last, a pink meteor collides with Schlatt's side, Protesilaus's hand curling around his throat as he bares his fangs in a snarl of rage.

We did it, Dream thinks, relief making him stumble.

The ground moves again. Protesilaus's hair flares wildly, soulfire pouring into his arms, while Schlatt laughs and laughs and *laughs* as his skin doesn't rot. Doesn't even begin to go black-veined and gray the way it should.

"Did you know that there's not two wither hybrids in this city?" Schlatt asks, grabbing Protesilaus's wrist in one too-strong hand, the bones cracking and crumbling into coal dust between his fingers. "There's *three*."

"Tech—!" There's a horrendous crunch as Schlatt punches Protesilaus across the roof, his body bouncing twice before slamming into the safety railings and breaking them. Dream takes a half step forward, not sure he's going to run or teleport to Techno's side, to keep him from falling—but he's forced to teleport further away a second later as Schlatt lands a blow on the ground where he was just moments before.

"This would be easier," he calls as Dream jumps from corner to corner, hunting for the netherite sword that wasn't hanging at Techno's hip when he went flying, "if you just gave in. I mean, it'd be easier if you weren't fuckin' immune to half the shit I throw at you, but you know what a real hero would do? He'd put the city first."

"You don't get to talk to me about what a real hero does!" Dream shouts back, finding the sword in the rubble of the concrete tomb Techno broke free of. Schlatt could snap steel, but *nothing* breaks netherite. And if Dream is lucky, the enchantments on Techno's sword will be enough to break through that impervious shell under Schlatt's skin.

"I've been doing this shit for years! For decades! And you got the nerve to act like you're the only one in the game?" That infamous temper is slipping again and he just needs it to slip a little further. To give him that opening. "To be honest with you, Hermes, I'm fuckin' glad you found that notebook! You wanna know why? Because I was *sick* of seeing your *stupid face* plastered everywhere, like you were a goddamn gift to the city!"

"Jealousy makes you ugly, Schlatt," Dream calls, drawing the sword, waiting for his moment. For that second, just a second, where Schlatt's control finally breaks.

"Oh, I'll show you ugly!" And Dream teleports, driving the sword forward with skills rusty from two months of disuse, the feel of a blade in his hands familiar and alien all at once. The netherite slides smoothly between muscle and bone, straight through Schlatt's skin and out the other side of his shoulder.

He has just a moment to feel triumph. Then the other arm slams into his middle and sends him flying.

It's a small bit of luck that Schlatt sends him away from the edge of the roof, not towards it, but Dream doesn't have time to orient himself before he's slamming into the rubble piled by the front door. A scream tears its way from his throat as pain rips through him, something desperately important in his spine snapping. He slumps to the ground, hands empty, and has to shove his mask off his face because he can't see through its eyeholes with his own eyes filling with tears.

The sword is still stuck in Schlatt, his arm's flailing because he can't quite reach the hilt to pull it out. The sight would be comical if it weren't for the fact that Dream can't move, can't seem to control his body anymore, pale-fingers hands bloodying themselves on the gravel of the rooftop as he drags himself away from the rubble. His legs aren't working right and the pain is unbelievable, all his usual distancing tactics failing him as he fights for breath against the sheer, overwhelming pressure of agony wrapping around his chest. One breath in, one breath out, try to push it away, but he can't breathe in right, can't seem to get a full chest of air.

There's a pink blur out on the edge of his sight. He forces himself to roll onto his stomach just in time to see Technoblade hit Schlatt, grabbing the hilt of his sword this time and ripping it out of his body. With a shout of pain, Schlatt turns on him, but Techno is faster, his iconic boar skull missing and his irises flaring bright white in a sea of black.

It's surprising, seeing white instead of red, but Dream can't focus on that for long. He's useless like this, a pile of dead weight that hasn't managed to do more than piss Schlatt off, but Techno can hold his own for only so long. Maybe if they hold out for long enough, Zephyrus will get here, but—

What if he doesn't? What if he's too late to save Techno? It takes a lot to kill a wither hybrid, but this high up above the city, there's no ambient pain or death for Techno to draw on to heal himself, and the reformed arm is probably only due to the sheer fucking torture that breathing is for Dream right now. But Schlatt had done it, somehow. In that prison, he'd killed one and stolen their power.

Dream's eyes lock onto the books, kicked to the side and forgotten.

Part of the rooftop crumbles as Techno's power flares out, destroying the ground under their feet. It makes Schlatt stumble long enough for him to land another hit, but both of them are using Dream to heal, and he can already see the bloody hole in Schlatt's chest starting to close, the growing patch of red slowing. Stopping.

He tries to pull himself forward, digging his fingers into the roof until his nails fracture and peel back, legs and tail dragging useless behind him. It *hurts*, and he can't breathe, so much worse than it had been with the Warden's boot on his back, and he has to stop after only a minute, choking on sobs as tears burn tracks down his face. When he dies, because he's starting to realize that he's dying on this rooftop, his face is going to look like Ranboo's. The thought almost makes him laugh.

The books are thirty, maybe forty feet away. That's nothing for an ender hybrid. Even one like Dream.

He lands with a gasp, blood flecking around his lips as he chokes and coughs from the searing pain that surges through him with the jolt on his spine. He's beginning to think that there's something worse wrong with his lungs, that maybe breaking his ribs again and again and *again* has finally come back to bite him. But he's within reach of the books and neither Schlatt nor Techno have noticed him yet.

Tears blur his vision as he pulls them close, his shaking hands splaying over the covers as he reads the tattoos etched in the skin that binds them. The letters aren't in any language he's ever seen before, and a slip of paper dislodges from under the cover of one as he tries to open it. He stares at Schlatt's painstaking notes, translations and cyphers, and can tell instantly that some of the letters are wrong.

Years, he'd said. It took him years to decipher the first book even a little bit, but that can't be right because Dream can read it like the back of a take-out menu, like the street signs he's read a thousand times before. He flips through the pages with fingers that tremble, coughs blood onto vellum and watches it vanish, watches his name carve itself on the front as the rules for it rewrite themselves to be easier to read when he's working with only one lung.

This is the book of life. This is how someone can bring a person back from the dead and, in the process, steal a piece of their soul. But if the soul isn't severed cleanly, if the death is messy or imprecise, it doesn't graft properly. It slips away before settling in, returning to its original owner.

It's not the book he needs, so he shoves it under his left arm and grabs the other one.

There are very few ways to kill a wither hybrid, but Dream has one under his fingers. His name etches itself across the front page of this book too, blood and sweat and tears overwriting whatever paltry bindings Schlatt tried to tie to it. These books were never meant for him. This was never his power to seize.

Dream stares at the instructions, at the cost they demand, and thinks that this would all have been so much easier if Schlatt had found this book first. Then he looks up.

Pink soulfire wreathes Techno's head like a halo. He's magnificent, his fangs bared and his sword dancing with an intent to kill that he's never shown before. His eyes are blinding, focused on their target, and he's the most beautiful man Dream's ever seen.

He's losing. Schlatt is laughing. Dream's lips move silently, the whistle of his faltering breath the only sound he hears past the ringing in his ears, and then he teleports, with both books in hand, into the fire Schlatt summoned once and then forgot.

For a second, he's not sure it works. There's an almighty shriek as both books go up in flames, as his hoodie catches light, and he's trying to bat the fire away with hands already beginning to blister up, but nothing changes in the first few seconds. Techno strikes, Schlatt ignores it, tries to swipe back and just barely misses crushing Techno's chest in.

Then his next swing goes a little wider. A little sloppier. And the next one goes sloppier still, his eyes widening in panic as his piercing laugh finally falters. And then he's stumbling as black crawls up his neck, into his face, his skin graying and feathering and, as Dream watches, slowly turning to ash.

He chokes on a laugh of his own, inaudible for the blood welling up in his chest cavity, as Schlatt withers and dies.

Techno turns, his pale gaze hunting for something. It locks on Dream and he has a moment to wonder if he's going to have to endure this too, Techno's loathing the last thing he sees as he dies, but then Techno's expression shifts, sword dropping from his hand as he runs across the unstable roof that keeps trying to crumble underneath his feet.

"*Shit*, Dream," he gasps as he drops to his knees, using his own hands to smother the embers still smoldering in the sleeves of Dream's hoodie. "Okay, okay, can you hear me? I need you to stay with me."

There's something important he has to say. The books, probably, he needs to tell Techno about the books and the danger they represent, even if both of them went up in flames and Dream can't see them anymore. But it's hard to focus on that when Techno's soulfire is warm against his cheek, the knobby brush of blackened bone on his skin oddly endearing.

There's an edge of panic in Techno's eyes, and—

(Protesilaus, standing awkwardly at the edge of the roof, looking like he's dying on the inside. It feels like the first time they're getting to meet as individuals, the first time Dream gets to talk to him without his rank or his name or his reputation getting in the way. The man is a villain, but Dream sees beneath the mask for just a second, and it makes him burn with a hunger for more.

He says, "Do you want to fight and pretend like that didn't just happen?" but what he means is—)

"I finally got to be your Patroclus," Dream whispers before everything goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

Protesilaus - Techno
Hermes/Nightmare - Dream
Zephyrus - Philza
Nemesis - Niki
Orpheus - Wilbur
Lethe - Ranboo
Icarus - Tommy
Daedalus - Tubbo
The Warden - Sam
The Captain - Puffy
Erebus - Eret
Ares - Schlatt
Somnus - George
Vulcan - Sapnap

dream: haha nooo babe ur so sexy haha

dream: *fucking dies*

Anyways, how we feelin boys.

beginnings

Chapter Notes

So this is, technically, an epilogue more than a final chapter. But, y'know, stuff never really ends, does it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There are no mourners at Schlatt's funeral. The Captain is there, as is Erebus, the remaining two founders forced to attend out of propriety if nothing else, but Orpheus does his work well. After everything he spread through calculated data dumps and sweet-voiced speeches on live television, no one wants to admit to liking Schlatt. Not that many people liked him to begin with.

The second casket is attended by a few more people, but not by much. Sapnap and George, Tommy and Tubbo, Ranboo under a ludicrously oversized umbrella, just in case the heavy gray clouds decide to open up in rain. Not because Hermes has a reputation so tarnished that there wouldn't be more, but because the funeral had been held privately at the request of his loved ones. Then again, Hermes didn't come out of the whole mess squeaky clean either.

Dream watches his own funeral with a sense of disconnect and wonders how the hell Sapnap is keeping a straight face.

He's perched up on the roof of one of the mausoleums, tail coiled around his waist with its fluff of fur resting in his lap. The hoodie he's wearing is a garish shade of pink, but nobody in this damn city seems to look up, so he's probably fine. His nullifier is still wrapped around his little finger, but he wants to get used to wearing his skin again, so he's leaving it off for now. If they actually let him out on patrol later, he'll activate it then.

"So like, is the casket actually empty?" He doesn't hear Techno arrive, but he doesn't flinch at the sound of his voice either, just tips his head back to look at his chin. Unlike Dream, Techno is actually dressed for a funeral, black suit jacket and black jeans, one of his Protesilaus button-ups standing in place of his usual flowing poet's shirt. Somewhere in the cemetery, Wilbur and Phil are dressed up as well, out of respect for the setting and their meeting with the Captain later.

"I put snacks in it," Dream says as Techno sits down next to him, letting his legs dangle off the edge as well. Slowly, falteringly, his tail uncoils and wraps around Techno's waist, a sharp twinge of pain shooting up through his spine when it shifts slightly wrong in the motion.

The Syndicate has a healer, but there's only so much one man can do. After a week, Dream can walk, can run, but the nerves don't always work right and his discs and vertebrae are always going to be prone to slippage around the place where his back broke. The lung had

been more important to fix in the moment, and it's something of a miracle that he can feel anything below his ribs at all.

A miracle, or something else. No one can see them but Techno and Erebus, Dream when he squints, but words wrap around his arms in a script no one else can read. He wants to try a blacklight someday, because he has the feeling it might be important to tell if his newest secret will slip free. Dream of the End, the Queen had called him, and he thinks he might finally have an idea of what that means.

"Why," Techno asks, voice slow and careful, "did you put snacks in your casket, Dream."

"It's a secure location sized for my body, and I had the funeral home put in a line for air to it. If I'm in this part of the city and I need a place to hide, can't think of anywhere better than six feet under, can you?" He lets himself lean sideways, cheek propped on Techno's shoulder, as warm fingers start to run through his fur.

"Uh, yes. Several. An empty apartment. An abandoned car. A dumpster you can open from the inside. One of these mausoleums that *isn't* literally buried." He feels Techno lean sideways too, the sharp edge of his jaw brushing against the crown of Dream's head. The hand not occupied with his tail slowly curls around his waist, the muscles in his arm firm against Dream's back.

"Nope. My hiding spot is still the best. You can't beat it, so don't even try." The mourners start to pack up to leave, the Captain resting her hand on Ranboo's shoulder for a long moment—she has to nearly stand on her toes to manage, and he ends up bent over a little to make it easier—before she turns to walk deeper into the cemetery. The kids leave, Erebus following close at their heels, and Sapnap heads for an exit closer to the street that will take him to seventh district. George is the last one to remain, standing at Dream's gravestone until even the gravediggers are gone.

Then he crouches, fishing around until he can make sure the air tube is free. Task complete, he stands, looks dead at where Dream and Techno are sitting, and mouths the word '*simp*' before turning to trudge off on his own as well.

"Was he talkin' to you or me?" Techno asks, disgruntled.

"Does it really matter?" The sky is getting darker, and Dream doesn't like the look of those clouds. Reluctantly he pulls himself out of Techno's arms, getting his feet under himself before standing and stretching.

It hurts. It might always hurt. But he's got a future to hurt in, so that's not such a terrible fate.

"We have, like, six hours before it's dark enough to go out on patrol," Techno says, copying him. "Assuming you're still planning on doing that."

"Did you buy me another hoodie?" Dream asks, thumbing at his ring until he feels the nullifier activate, the disguise settling over his features. He thinks he can tell where this is going.

“I did, yeah, but I wasn’t sure Nightmare was going to be active without some big bad to target.” Techno jumps to the ground, flexing his knees as he lands, then looks up. A single droplet of rain lands on his glasses, and he makes a noise like he’s dying.

Dream laughs, then teleports down next to him, letting Techno open up his umbrella even if the rain hasn’t *really* started yet. He takes the chance to lean into Techno’s side, tucked up under one arm, and they start to walk, in sync in a way that only five years of fighting each other can bring. “I have other stuff to look into. I want to keep an eye on the sixth, obviously —”

“That is literally our job. Stop doin’ our job.”

“—and I’m going to find Sapnap’s dad.” That makes Techno fall quiet at his side, only the slowly growing sound of rain hitting the ground accompanying them to the cemetery gates. “Something about his disappearance isn’t right. Schlatt blocked all investigations, but he’s dead now, and I’m not a hero anymore anyways. So I’m going to find him.”

“Sounds like kind of a long term project,” Techno observes, putting his body between Dream and the street when they step out onto the sidewalk. There isn’t even enough water on the road for splashing to be a problem, but the gesture is sweet.

“Sure does,” Dream says, letting Techno turn them towards a deli that he’s mentioned once or twice. “Know anybody who might be able to help me with that?”

Techno grins at him and says, “I can think of some people.”

Chapter End Notes

There are... counts on fingers.... four? Other fics I want to do in this 'verse. At least one from Techno's POV set during Dream's recovery where they do actually have that conversation they've been needing to have, a longer crimeboys-centric one focusing on Tommy during and a bit after the events of Ends, Justified, something small from Phil's POV because man did *not* sign on for this particular kind of emotional drama when he adopted his kids, and a sequel. Because there is a sequel in the planning stages, which I estimate will be around the length of this fic, maybe?

Thing is, the pace at which I slammed through this motherfucker was, uh, shall we say, unsustainable. I'm going to hibernate for at least a couple weeks.

But if you wanna see more stuff - concept sketches, extremely stupid comics, and probably previews of anything I have coming down the line - you can [check me out on tumblr](#), and I'm always more than happy to talk there too.

Thanks for reading <3

Works inspired by this one

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